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# **University of Sussex**

## ***“It’s a shared responsibility”*. The relationship between the working environment of child protection teams and practitioners’ emotionality and professional resilience: a psycho-social exploration**

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**Thesis submitted for the Doctorate in Social Work**

**February 2018**

**WORK NOT SUBMITTED ELSEWHERE FOR EXAMINATION**

**I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be,  
submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of  
any other degree.**

**Signed: .....**

**Name: .....**

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## **Thesis summary**

My research has adopted a psycho-social approach to investigate the ways in which professionals mediate between the emotional demands of their work and the statutory duties and responsibilities of their role. In order to fully understand the roles played by the professional's individual characteristics, the team dynamics and the broader emotional texture of the child protection system in shaping the emotional experiences of front-line practitioners, this study has utilised a multiple-case study design. Professionals from two different child protection teams, one in Italy and one in England, have represented the two units of analysis. In particular, the research has explored the emotional vicissitudes of six front line practitioners (three from each team) over a period of sixteen months. Data have been gathered through periodic interviews with the research participants, psychoanalytically informed observations of their supervision sessions, periodic observations of team meeting discussions, and an interactive activity which had involved their entire teams. Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) Listening Guide has been utilised in order to obtain a deep understanding of practitioners' stories in a way that actively incorporated 'the public and cultural narrative that inform their lives, and the crucial intersection of these narratives with other relevant social forces' (Somers, 1994; 620).

The findings of this research highlight how professionals within the Italian context appeared to be more capable of talking about the way in which their work affected them emotionally, compared with their English colleagues. One of the main reasons for this can be traced to the increasingly paranoid attitude that appears to permeate the overall English child protection system, especially after the death of Peter Connolly ('Baby P') and the public outcry which followed that tragic event. The child protection team was seen to have the potential to act as a supportive place where professionals' emotional responses can not only be recognised and contained, but also where the intensity of these emotional responses can be suitably modulated to a more manageable level. Where this occurs, it can allow professionals to remain in touch with their own emotions, which in turn can enhance their ability to effectively protect and safeguard vulnerable children and their families. Conversely, it was shown that, if professionals are not

adequately supported within their working environment, they may be left feeling 'doubly deprived' at an emotional level, firstly from the nature of their undeniably challenging work and, secondly, through the imposition of an unresponsive working environment over which they have minimal control. These emotional deprivations may adversely affect their ability to work competently and safely creating a situation whereby less resilient practitioners might identify themselves with negative aspects of their working environment. This could reduce their ability to fully appreciate vulnerable people's needs and circumstances and to practice safely and competently. Ultimately it might result in practitioners leaving the profession. Contrary to popular perception, it might be the most resilient who would leave first, as they could recognise the damaging effects of an environment which did not contain or support them. Finally, the study makes a series of recommendations that could improve the retention of child protection social workers and enhance the outcomes of their work, including supporting front-line practitioners in becoming more familiar in the ways organisational dynamics might affect their work. The study also highlights the importance, for organisations, of putting in place strategies to create a safe environment in which they can work, and not to make them feel overly exposed towards anything or anyone who could try to affect their ability to perform their duties and responsibilities.

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## **1 Chapter: Introduction**

It is important, at the beginning of this thesis, to revisit my longstanding personal and professional interest in the role played by emotions in social work practice as it has influenced the ontological, epistemological and methodological premises of my thesis.

Since qualifying as a social worker in Italy, I mainly worked in different children and families' settings (i.e. child protection, children in need, fostering and adoption teams, etc.). However, for a substantial amount of time, I never worked full time for just one organisation, but often worked between at least two different settings. I have also briefly worked in adult social work settings.

Within this highly unusual working arrangement, I soon realised that, whilst working within the overall field of Children and Families and Child Protection settings I was exposed to and experienced a variety of emotions in an intense, often violent, intrusive and overwhelming way. This invariably either affected my cognitive reasoning, my ability to make decisions, or my capacity to empathise with the people I was working with. When talking with either colleagues or my line managers, it appeared that emotions, and more specifically my responses to some of the situations I encountered, were frequently perceived negatively, either as an obstacle or something that should be 'put aside' as one of my team manager once told me. At the same time, I could no longer deny that the nature and the intensity of my emotional responses were not only directly affected by the working relationships that existed within the various teams I worked in, but also by my own previous individual experiences. This gradual realisation led me to undertake a two-year course in 2003 in Infant and Young Child Observation at the Tavistock Clinic. One of the essential components of this training is the possibility for observers to explore in depth their own emotional responses to the observations (Miller et al, 1989). More importantly, Rustin (1989) highlights the importance for observers of discussing and reflecting on those emotional responses during formal group discussions as it promotes a deeper 'learning from experience' process (Bion, 1962). Throughout the entire training, I had the opportunity to experience first-hand the benefits of sharing my own experiences with other fellow students. It gave me the chance to move beyond

and below the observed behaviour and to become more aware of the way unconscious processes affect our perceptions and their impact on our emotional development. This training undoubtedly represents a crucial learning experience for me, which not only influenced some of my career decisions, but directly shaped some of the methodological decisions I adopted in this research project. In chapter 5, for example, I have included a concrete example of the way in which I utilised my own emotional responses to enhance my understanding of the emotional texture of the overall child protection system in Italy and England.

In 2007 I moved to the UK and I began working as a social work lecturer largely teaching in qualifying programmes. In this new and different working arrangement I continued to be interested in the role emotions played although primarily from a student's perspective. Whilst involved in teaching various modules to qualified social workers I noticed the dilemmas that emotional openness posed for them. Although they acknowledged the emotional demands of their work, they often spoke of how openly acknowledging the effect of this would most likely lead to opinions that they were struggling with their jobs, consequently losing professional credibility amongst their colleagues and managers.

Whilst I was becoming familiar with the complexities of the English child protection system, I found myself both startled and intimidated by the level of anger, outrage and vilification towards the social work profession that followed the death of eighteen-month-old Peter Connolly, publicly known as 'Baby P' (Cooper, 2009; Warner, 2013; Shoesmith, 2016). In the midst of this tragic situation, I often wondered how difficult it must have been for front-line practitioners to continue to maintain an adequate level of confidence in their work. Although I had previously read how the death of eight-year-old Victoria Climbié had triggered a similar level of indignation in 2000 (Cooper, 2005; Rustin, 2005), I admit that I struggled to make sense of not only the intensity of the public reaction to Peter Connolly's tragic death, but also of the manipulation and instrumentalization used by politicians following this child's death (Jones, 2014; Shoesmith, 2016). The unprecedented number of reviews of social work practice and education which followed (Lamin, 2009; SWRB, 2009; Munro, 2012; Croisdale-Appleby,

2014) has exponentially increased the level of uncertainty in the English social work profession.

It was within this context that I first became interested in obtaining a deeper understanding of the relationship between emotions and the working environment in social work practice (Obholzer and Roberts, 2009). As discussed in greater detail later, in my CAS<sup>1</sup> I explored the relationship between emotions, denial and power structures in social work practice (Poletti, 2014). The outcomes of that literature review reinforced my desire to undertake a research project that would allow me to investigate the intersectionality and mutual influences between social workers' internal emotional responses to their work, their statutory duties and responsibilities, and their working environment.

To further enhance the understanding of the relationship between professionals' inner emotional experiences and the outer expression of those experiences (Scherer and Ekman, 1984) and how these might affect practitioners' capacity to practise safely and competently, I decided to closely follow and compare the emotional experiences of front-line child protection social workers in two different countries, Italy and England. Collier (1993) argues that not only could such comparison become a useful instrument for analysis, but it could also be utilised in 'testing hypotheses and could contribute to the inductive discovery of new hypothesis and to theory building' (p.105). Due to the emphasis that current UK government policies place in encouraging Local Authorities in recruiting and retaining emotionally resilient professionals (Biggart et al, 2016) I was drawn to undertake primary research around the importance emotions play in social work practice in child protection.

In this introduction I have set out the personal and professional premises for the work. Within the literature review (chapter 2), I will present and discuss the outcomes of a review of the existing literature which takes into consideration the role of emotions in social work practice. The findings of this literature review will be presented according to three constituting dimensions of the social work profession: the dimension of the social

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<sup>1</sup> Critical Analytical Study of an area of Professional Practice – This was an assessed piece of work for this doctorate which I completed in year 2

worker as a person, the dimension of service users and, finally, the organisational dimension in which social workers operate.

Building upon the outcomes of the literature review, in Chapter 3 I will present the research question that has guided this project followed by a discussion of the methodological approach I have adopted: a psycho-social approach to multiple case study analysis. Within this chapter I will highlight the congruency between the ontological and epistemological foundations of this thesis and both the methodological approach and the different methods utilised to collect data. The chapter will then conclude with a discussion of some of the ethical dilemmas I encountered during my research journey.

In Chapter 4, I will provide a discussion of the way in which the data has been analysed and collected both in Italy and England. In the second part of this chapter a small example of how the data was analysed is presented. The chapter will then conclude with a presentation of the way in which my own emotional responses have been actively utilised to obtain an in-depth understanding of the emotional experiences of the research participants.

In Chapter 5 I will describe the substantial differences that emerged in the emotional texture of the child protection system in the two chosen countries: Italy and England. This chapter will explicitly reflect upon the way in which those differences appeared to influence, either positively or negatively, how the practitioners' spoke about their emotional experiences.

The discussion in Chapter 6 will focus around the highly complex and ambivalent relationship between emotions and the working environment as they emerged from the stories of three of my research participants: Kathryn and Ann from England, and Giorgia from Italy. Kathryn and Ann's stories will be presented and analysed as they succinctly encapsulate contrasting aspects of this relationship. I will then raise some general considerations regarding the inevitable tension between two fundamental components of social work practice: emotions and the working environment. Giorgia's story will be utilised to bring to light the potential detrimental effects that unrecognised and

unacknowledged emotions may have on the nature of the relationships professionals develop in their daily work.

Directly drawing from the content of the previous chapters, in Chapter 7 I will discuss further some of the complexities of the relationship between emotions and the working environment in child protection. At the beginning, I will reflect on the way in which unacknowledged individual and institutional defences might affect social workers' abilities to both recognise and take into consideration other people's situations and experiences and their ability to practice safely and competently. Secondly, I will demonstrate how the presence of powerful and rigid organisational defences can have detrimental effects on front-line practitioners and the potential danger of experiencing a 'double deprivation' as described by Henry (1974). I will then argue that this situation can result in resilient practitioners leaving their work. Finally, based on the main points touched upon in the first part of this chapter, I will highlight the positive influence that a responsive, containing and emotionally supportive working environment may have on social workers' emotional resilience. I will also discuss the importance for practitioners of 'feeling safe' and protected in their daily work and the impact it might have on their ability to practice safely and competently. Finally, based on the discussion raised in the first half of this chapter, I will demonstrate the importance of conceptualising social workers' ability to satisfactorily deal with the emotional demands of their daily work as a dynamic feature, stemming from the interaction between their personal emotional resilience and the professional context in which they operate. I then suggest naming this new concept 'professional resilience'. Taking into consideration the outcomes of the literature review and the material gathered as part of this research project, the chapter will conclude by highlighting some potential practical implications.

This thesis will conclude with a summary of the main findings and the implications those findings might have for social work practice alongside a brief critical evaluation of the methodological approach utilised for this research project. I will then discuss how I intend to move forward and develop some of the findings discussed in this thesis.

## **2 Chapter: Social Work Practice and Emotions: A Review of the Literature**

Emotions have attracted the attention of poets, philosophers, scientists, psychologists, sociologists and other scholars (Howe, 2008; Boler, 1997; McNaughton, 2013) for centuries. In the last few decades, it has been possible to observe an increase of attention and production of a large and fast-growing body of literature that focuses on the role emotions play in social work practice. Providing a comprehensive overview of the available literature regarding the relationship between emotions and social work practice therefore represents an exciting but daunting task.

One of the main challenges of this task certainly lies, as McNaughton (2013) reminds us, in the ongoing 'little agreement amongst professionals and disciplines' on what emotions are as an 'object of study' (p.72).

A similar argument has been put forward by Turner (2005), a sociologist, who claims that, when it comes to answering the question 'what are emotions?', 'there are almost as many answers as there are theoretical approaches explaining the dynamics of emotions' (p. 2). He subsequently argues that taking a micro-sociological perspective to the study of emotions can 'potentially offer a way to integrate the diverse elements involved in the arousal and flow of emotions' (2005;10) which involve:

*(1) the biological activation of key body systems; (2) socially constructed cultural definitions and constraints on what emotions should be experienced and expressed in a situation; (3) the application of linguistic labels provided by culture to internal sensation; (4) the overt expression of emotions through facial, voice, paralinguistic moves; and (5) perceptions and appraisal of situational objects and events (p.9)*

McNaughton (2013) develops Turner's claim further, arguing that emotions rest 'between the idealised and the invisible, sitting uneasily at the intersection between objective facts and subjective values (p.71).

In my CAS (Poletti, 2014), I reviewed the existing published literature to ascertain the possible relationship between emotions, denial and power structures in social work

practice in children and families' settings. The current chapter builds on the findings of that study. Specifically, it provides an attempt to review the existing literature to interpret the evidence 'that could produce new insights and a fresh way of understanding' (Dixon-Wood et al, 2006;11) relating to the role emotions play in social work practice and their inter-relationship with practitioners' working environment.

## 2.1 Methodological Approach to Literature Review: Critical Interpretive Synthesis (CIS)

As briefly mentioned earlier, reviewing literature that deals with emotions in social work presents not only definitional issues, but also substantive methodological challenges. Historically, the emotional aspects of social work practice have been discussed in various forms (journal articles, books, case studies, etc.) from academics, front-line practitioners and even scholars from allied disciplines. Critical Interpretive Synthesis, a methodological approach to literature review, first devised by Dixon-Wood and colleagues (Dixon-Wood et al, 2006), appears to be particularly suitable for the current review for many different reasons.

Firstly, it offers the possibility of synthesising a 'large, amorphous and complex body of literature (p.9) in a form that is 'empirically and theoretically grounded' (p.9). Specifically, CIS:

*integrates evidence from across the studies in the review to a coherent theoretical framework comprising a network of constructs and the relationships between them [...] generated through a detailed analysis of the evidence included in a review, analogous to the analysis in primary qualitative research (Dixon-Wood, 2006;11)*

Secondly, CIS encourages the inclusion of all forms of evidence, not only qualitative or quantitative studies, but also theoretical studies, since its main concern is 'with the development of concepts and theories that integrate those theories' (Dixon-Wood et al, 2006;2). Therefore, Dixon-Wood and colleagues (2006) advocate for researchers to



adopt a critical approach to identifying the literature, purposively sampling literature according to their relevance toward the generation of new theory.

Thirdly, CIS 'recognises the need for flexibility in the conduct of review' (p.9) and considers the various stages of the review process (i.e. question formulation, searching, selection, data extraction, synthesis) as 'iterative, interactive, dynamic and recursive' (p.9) rather than a more 'staged' approach in which researchers have to follow a strict predefined sequence of steps.

Fourthly, in this particular type of review, the research question is considered as being a 'compass rather than an anchor and as something that would not finally be settled until the end of the review' (Dixon-Wood et al, 2006;3).

Finally, CIS requires researchers to reflect constantly on the relevance, credibility and potential contribution of the identified evidence to produce a synthetic construct which will be 'critically informed, plausible given the available evidence' (p.10). Dixon-Wood et al (2006) explicitly acknowledge the importance of the researcher's 'authorial voice' in this iterative and reflective process, which allows 'the possibility of several disparate aspects of a phenomenon being unified in a more useful and explanatory way' (p. 5). Developing Dixon-Wood et al's position (2006), Major and Savin-Baden (2012), strongly argue that, when synthesising qualitative studies, researchers should be able to retain the 'epistemological unity' of the original studies, in an attempt to 'recognise and acknowledge different interpretive positions and consider how they support and refuse one another' (p.12).

Directly drawing from the work of Dixon-Wood et al (2006) the method employed to conduct the current review has followed the following steps:

- a) Formulating the Research Question;
- b) Searching the literature;
- c) Sampling;
- d) Determination of quality;
- e) Data extraction;
- f) Conducting and Interpretative Synthesis

In my CAS (Poletti, 2014) I have discussed in greater detail the relevance of CIS as methodological approach to literature review for social work. For the current review of the literature I have followed the same principles. In appendix 1, I have included a comprehensive presentation of the way in which I have searched through the literature whilst maintaining an iterative and reflective approach throughout in order to address the following question:

*What is known about the role emotions play in social work practice with Children and Families and their relationship with the working environment within both the Italian and English contexts?*

The present review consequently began with a detailed reading, analysis and appraisal of the identified papers, followed by an identification of some recurrent themes. In particular, at this stage, it was important to maintain a recursive, dynamic and reflective approach to the synthesis (Dixon-Wood, 2006). This ongoing, constant and recurring questioning of the way literature has constructed, described and presented the relationship between emotions and social work practice has been a crucial aspect throughout the entire review.

## 2.2 Discussion of findings: Social Work and Emotions a 'double edged sword' relationship

As will be discussed later, although there is widespread consensus on the crucial function emotions play in social work, there is also an implicit acknowledgment that emotions play a complex role in practitioners' experiences. To provide a convincing 'synthesising' argument (Dixon-Wood et al, 2006), the retrieved literature will be presented and discussed according to the three main constituting aspects of professional social work practice as identified by Lia Sanicola (1991) in her book 'Aviamento al Servizio Sociale<sup>2</sup>':

- The dimension of the social worker as a person
- The dimension of the service user(s)
- The organisational dimension within which social workers operate in line with their statutory duties and responsibilities.

What now follows is the presentation of the findings of the current review according to the above dimensions. Although for convenience of exposition each dimension will be presented and discussed individually, it is important to keep in mind that they are all interconnected.

### *2.2.1 Emotion and the social worker as a person*

This section will concentrate on the analysis and synthesis of literature that considers the impact emotions have on the social worker as a person. In particular, it is possible to identify two main emerging themes from the literature, each of which mainly focuses on highly relevant areas of social work practice. The first emerging theme emphasises the effect emotions might have on professionals' decision-making processes. The second theme, instead, focuses on the relationship between emotions and social workers' ability (or struggle) to maintain a positive and constructive attitude in the face of difficulties and frustration, which leads to the enhancement of emotional resilience.

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<sup>2</sup> "Introduction to Social Work"

### 2.2.1.1 Emotions and decision-making processes;

Writing from an Education perspective, Boler (1997) interestingly points out that, for a long-time, emotions and rationality have been considered in binary opposition:

*emotions have more often than not been maligned, neglected, and assigned as a property of the 'other', whereas theorists in many disciplines have demonstrated the situated political investments of the stance we call 'rationality' (p.203).*

From a social work perspective, Munro (1999), in one of her seminal papers, similarly acknowledges that within the literature two main forms of reasoning could be identified. This echoes the Cartesian separation of reason from emotion: analytic and intuitive reasoning. The first form of reasoning is characterised by 'a step-by-step, conscious logically defensible process' (Hammond, 1996; 60 cited in Munro 1999) and has the advantage of being defensible by 'reference to reliable, public standards of ascertainable truth' (Munro, 1999;746). Conversely, intuitive reasoning is described as 'a cognitive process that somehow produces an answer, solution or idea without the use of a conscious, logically defensible, step-by-step process' (Hammond, 1996; 60). Those 'two dimensions of human cognitive capacity should be seen as existing on a continuum, not as a dichotomy' (Munro, 1996;747). The work of Damasio (1994) can be considered consistent with Hammond's ideas and has been crucial in providing a more in depth understanding of the role emotions play in both forms of reasoning. He argues that:

*certain aspects of the process of emotion and feeling are indispensable for rationality [...] Emotion and feeling [...] assist us with the daunting task of predicting an uncertain future and planning our actions accordingly (Damasio, 1994;xiv-xv).*

White, directly drawing from the work of Haidt (2001), similarly reiterates that 'reasoning follows moral judgements and not the other way around and therefore 'emotions are, then indispensable (but not infallible) guides to decision-making' (White, 2009;230).

The findings of two empirical studies (LeBlanc et al, 2012; Youssef et al, 2012) provide additional evidence of the complex relationship between emotions and decision-making processes. They also shed further light on how strong emotional responses, such as

high level of stress and anxieties, might induce professionals to prefer 'to find ways of simplifying reasoning by taking shortcuts, risking a higher level of error' (Munro, 1999;747).

Le Blanc et al (2012) looked at the complexity of emotional responses to stress in social workers within the child protection arena. They recorded social workers' emotional responses to simulated situations in which actors played mothers alleged to have maltreated their children. Participants, in their first interview, experienced significant cortisol responses, which are considered a physiological indicator of stress. Those physiological responses, however, were significantly lower during the second interview. The research team consequently argued that the uncertainty of the new situation – during the first interview – played a pivotal role in eliciting the strong physiological response. They also observed that 'physiological and stress responses appeared to be affected differently by the novelty of a situation as well as by the repeat exposure to potentially stressful situations' (p.410) and subsequently acknowledged how 'confrontational situations where workers exhibited stress responses can alter judgements and were associated with some increased perception of risk' (p.410).

The findings from LeBlanc et al (2012) should be considered alongside the outcomes of a similar research project, conducted by Youssef and colleagues (2012) who investigated the impact stress might have on moral decision-making as stress 'appear[s] to give preference to the autonomic emotional system at the expenses of the cognitive controlled system' (p.496). They provide evidence of how stress alters moral decision making as thought-processes can be over-ridden. Utilising a micro-sociological perspective as a theoretical framework, Marrable (2014), provides additional evidence of how 'emotion-laden interactions between practitioners in multi-agency children's services, children and parents, affected the diagnosis, treatment, communication and outcome for children's wellbeing' (p.401). More recently, O'Connor and Leonard (2014) add further evidence of how 'emotional responses and triggers, relationship dynamic and practice contexts were identified as interacting in decision making' (p.1811). De Bortoli and Dolan (2015), in acknowledging the potential influence emotions may have on professionals' decision-making processes, underline the importance of 'identify[ing] the circumstances in which emotions assist or hinder decision making' (p.2151). They

introduce a crucial aspect: the idea that emotions do not necessarily influence only in a negative way on social workers' decision-making processes. Braescu (2012), develops this idea further, noting how the experience of 'mild fear' in front line practitioners 'fuels cognition and flourishes reflexivity' and 'mobilises the social worker to be more guarded and to carefully plan the following steps in order to achieve the proposed outcomes' (Braescu, 2012;11). Moons and Mackie (2007) similarly demonstrate that it is possible to think 'straight while seeing red'. In their article, they explicitly challenge the common assumption that angry people 'trigger superficial, nonanalytical information processing' (p.706). Instead they demonstrate how angry people selectively use relevant clues to promote analytic processing.

These studies consequently highlight the importance of emotionality in social work practice and the impact it has on practitioners' ability not only to face uncertainties and complexities, but also on their ability to continue thinking even when 'under fire' (Bower, 2005). Psychoanalytic thinking has been suggested as one way of supporting practitioners in thinking their way through such dynamics (Bower, 2005). Davies and Collings (2008), suggest that enhancing practitioners' awareness of the impact of unconscious dynamics such as ambivalence, projection, transference, and counter-transference could deepen their insight into how their own emotional responses affect their decision-making processes. This should not only enhance their capacity to protect children and support families, but also address the 'disabling burnout that has characterised the field for decades' (p.23). There is a plethora of psychoanalytically-informed literature that explicitly acknowledges the importance of individual anxieties and unconscious dynamics being properly understood and adequately 'contained' (Bion, 1962) in order to allow professionals to maintain a good ability to think even when under considerable stress. Davies (2008) contends that it is essential for practitioners, and the organisations in which they operate, to renounce the omnipotent idea that they could predict, detect and consequently prevent child abuse and child deaths. By giving up this omnipotent attitude, Davies argues, social workers would be able to establish a more realistic and constructive relationship with the people they work with, 'promote more in-depth assessment' (p.142), and subsequently make the most appropriate decisions for them. Most of the scholars who write from a psychodynamic perspective explicitly refer

to Klein's work and her conceptualisation of two main positions, or states of mind: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. Segal (1989) has provided a comprehensive, detailed and accessible overview of Klein's ideas, however, for the purposes of this chapter, it might be important to just consider the influence these different positions could have on the practitioners' decision-making process. As Waddel (2003) reminds us, Klein's ideas have 'made it possible to think about the nature and meaning of human behaviour as it is affected by the changing predominance of different mental states' (p.6). In the paranoid-schizoid position<sup>3</sup>, the level of anxieties experienced by an individual make the process of thinking particularly difficult if not impossible. Ferguson (2005) whilst discussing the emotional aspects of child protection, describes what Klein would consider a key feature of the paranoid schizoid position: the fear for the individual's own survival

*everyone involved in this kind of work knows these feelings. That sense in which you are so preoccupied with your own safety and survival that the safety and survival of the child become afterthought, where just getting out of the house alive or relatively unscathed becomes the defining criteria of a good intervention (p.787)*

Furthermore, in this particular state of mind, relationships are experienced as either being 'unrealistically wonderful (good) or unrealistically terrible (bad)' (Waddel, 2003;5). More importantly, relationships are perceived as being either sadomasochistic or mergers, of an 'either with me or against me' type. Omnipotent and magical solutions to problems or issues are another key feature of the paranoid-schizoid position. Individuals in this particular state of mind therefore struggle with 'thinking' and find it challenging when other people have opinions and ideas that are different from their own. On the other hand, in the depressive position, which in Klein's conceptualisation is a qualitatively different state of mind, the level of anxiety is more manageable and there is sufficient mental space for thinking and, consequently, a more realistic approach to

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<sup>3</sup> For Klein this is the earliest position, of a very young infant. It refers to both a constellation of anxieties, defence mechanisms and a particular set of object relations with both the internal and external worlds.

reality is possible. Differences, in this particular state of mind, are perceived as being a source of creativity rather than a major issue and relationships are perceived as being reciprocal. More importantly, according to Klein's conceptualisation, it is only within this state of mind that a genuine concern for someone else's wellbeing and welfare can take place. According to all the papers and research that explicitly draw from psychodynamic concepts, the importance of the depressive position is crucial. Although the Kleinian tradition postulates that people constantly fluctuate between these two main positions throughout their lives, professionals need to be aware of their own states of mind and the way they might affect decisions they make in their daily work. According to this tradition, the depressive position is the more appropriate frame of mind that can support professionals in making the most appropriate decision to safeguard and protect the people they are working with. It is therefore important for practitioners and organisations to be mindful of the constant fluctuations in the states of mind of their practitioners and support them to maintain the depressive position.

#### *2.2.1.2 Emotions and Resilience*

Within social work literature, in the last decade, it has been possible to observe an increase in the production of literature that focuses on the theoretical construct of 'Emotional Intelligence' (EI). Goleman (1996), one of the key writers on EI, has defined it as the ability to

*motivate one-self and persist in the face of frustrations; to control impulse and delay gratifications; to regulate one's mood and keep distress from swamping the ability to think; to emphasise hope (p.16).*

Building on Goleman's ideas, and applying them to a social work perspective, both Morrison (2007) and Ingram (2012; 2015) have stressed the importance of EI in all areas of practice that directly influence the professionals' ability to 'adapt to internal and external stressors' (Klohen, 1996;1068) and not only in enhancing the ability for employers to retain staff. Morrison (2007), in particular, provides a comprehensive overview of the development of the theoretical construct of EI and emphasises its importance across all areas of social work practice (i.e. from engagement to decision



making processes). Similarly, Ingram (2012), contends that some components of EI, such as empathy and emotional regulation, have a substantial impact on the service user / social worker relationship. By reiterating the importance of relationships in social work practice, he emphasises the potential positive influence practitioners' self-awareness and ability to understand their own feelings might have on their ability to reflect on their practice. In doing this, Ingram (2012) argues that 'we can then develop the idea of reflection that encompasses the activity of looking back at what we did, and saw, and felt and knew about a situation' (p.998). There is widespread recognition of the emotional demands of social work practice (Collins, 2008; Curtis, Moriarty and Netten, 2009). According to Curtis et al (2010) the expected working life for social workers is less than eight years, significantly lower than allied professions such as nurses and doctors. Coetzee and Harry (2013) have investigated the correlations between EI and career adaptability in a large group of call centre workers. In their study they convincingly highlight how EI 'is seen to provide the potentials for performance' (Coetzee and Harry, 2013;91) and consequently could strengthen workers' career adaptability. Similarly, Buruck et al (2016) provide ample evidence of how emotionally intelligent health care practitioners within health care are better able to deal with negative emotions and consequently are better able to reduce job stress and enhance personal well-being.

Kinman and Grant (2011; 2012; 2013) have written extensively on the links between social work, EI, and resilience. In an early article they explored the correlations, in a large group of social work students, between emotional and social competencies (namely, EI, reflective ability, empathy, social competence, resilience) and psychological distress. They have provided evidence that social work students who are emotionally and socially competent appear to be more resilient to stress. McFadden et al (2015) offer additional evidence that child protection workers are 'particularly vulnerable to burnout due to their poor working conditions, excessive paperwork, long working hours, little opportunity for advancement and ineffective bureaucratic structures' (p.1548). Amongst the factors linked to the professionals as individuals, McFadden et al (2015) highlight how personal trauma history in child protection workers might increase their likelihood to develop emotional burnout or vicarious traumatisation. They further

emphasise the importance of training and preparation to enhance practitioners' competencies and confidence in their abilities. The use of active coping strategies (i.e. emotional restructuring, problem solving and emotion-focussed coping methods) have also been identified as a factor that has a direct effect on professionals' ability to deal with emotional stress (Aclaro-Lapidario, 2007; McGowan et al, 2009). Similarly, McFadden et al (2015) contend that job satisfaction is a major factor in protecting professionals' emotional wellbeing (Nordick, 2002; Chen and Scannapieco, 2010; Stalker et al, 2007). It therefore appears that the constructs of EI and Resilience are intrinsically connected to one another.

A common theme emerging from the entire literature on EI is that practitioners who have a good understanding of their own emotions and have a high level of self-awareness are more likely to be able to protect their well-being and maintain a positive and constructive attitude. A special issue of the British Journal of Psychotherapy in 2007 contained a number of different papers that openly questioned whether EI is a 'product of infancy' and therefore re-emphasised the importance of the early experiences, or whether it is a 'life-long process of development' (Vellacott, 2007;167). What transpires from the existing literature is that the construct of Emotional Resilience, from a psychodynamic perspective, appears to focus on the importance of good internal resources that can support and foster hope, contain anxieties and 'thinking'. From Kleinian perspectives, those internal resources, otherwise called 'good objects' are the results of a complex interaction between innate characteristics, external events and the individual and unique experience of those events (Segal, 1988).

### *2.2.2 The impact emotions have on the service user – social worker relationship*

It is possible to identify a wealth of published papers that emphasise the importance of emotions in human relationships and the inevitable influence they have on the outcomes of those relationships in either a positive or negative way (Parkinson et al, 2005; Scheff and Retzinger, 1991; Davies, 2008; Davies and Collins, 2008). Some of the identified articles focus on a particular emotion or set of emotions and provide interesting accounts of the inevitable impact those emotions have on social work

practice. Directly drawing on Object Relations Theory, Smith (2006) claims that professionals, in order to maintain a more authentic approach to reality, need

*to recognise the good and bad in people [...]. However, they will achieve this recognition without relinquishing the fear-inspired caution that comes from acknowledging that people are capable of extreme destruction, damage and danger (paranoid-schizoid position) and the fact that this must also be borne in mind (p.80).*

By acknowledging that, in social work practice, risks are 'disconcertedly real' and therefore should neither be underestimated nor over-estimated. Smith (2006) thus contends that practitioners should be able to 'understand to fear the right thing, the right way at the right time' (p.79)

Therefore, those studies strongly advocate for a suitable acknowledgment and recognition of fear as an intrinsic and fundamental aspect of social work practice at any level (from the interpersonal level, through the organisational and until the policy level) to enhance workers' ability to protect children and vulnerable adults from significant harm. By looking at the published literature, Dwyer (2007) similarly echoes the importance that emotions, like fear, should be openly discussed within social work practice. She argues that practitioners should be able to deal constructively with uncertainties:

*practitioners need to stay in uncertainty for longer, and to assess whether, because of the circumstances, there is a need to hold on to doubt, whilst taking the time to seek out other possible versions (Dwyer, 2007;53)*

The emotions of guilt and shame in social work practice are addressed in studies by Gibson (2013; 2014; 2015; 2016) and Morgan and King (2012) amongst others. Gibson (2014) provides a comprehensive review of the existing literature in which he demonstrates how the feeling of 'shame' permeates all areas of social work practice. Although he fully acknowledges that the experiences reported in his scoping review were 'complex, involving a range of contexts' (p.558) he nonetheless identifies a series

of potential negative consequences shame might have on front line practitioners. Some of those practitioners reported that not only had they tried to isolate themselves from others and often resigned from their position, but, more importantly, they acknowledged occasionally feeling fearful and consequently 'sought to avoid certain service users in attempts to prevent similar experiences' (p.559). In his writings Gibson, therefore, emphasises that shame and guilt if not properly explored might create substantial barriers towards creating an effective working partnership between service users and practitioners. On the other hand, Morgan and King (2012) demonstrate, similarly to Gibson (2013), that feelings of shame and guilt, if recognised, acknowledged, and suitably contained and addressed by social workers, could potentially promote empathy and mobilise pro-social behaviour. As noted above, Davies and Collings (2008) argue that child protection workers should be rethinking an effective psychodynamic 'relationship-based practice' which might enhance their ability to build up and maintain positive relationships with the people they work with. This situation might increase their ability to better protect and safeguard vulnerable children and support their families. Fosberg and Vagli (2007), although not focusing their discussion on a particular emotion, similarly emphasised that emotions are an intrinsic aspect of child protection work and consequently how crucial it is that they are not excluded or denied, but actively incorporated within the main practice discourses. Their study provides further evidence of the importance for practitioners to be able to fully capture, understand, and realistically acknowledge the whole range of different emotions experienced in their work. This, in return, would enable them to enhance their awareness of the complexity and contradictions of their emotional responses, which they could use constructively to build up stronger and more meaningful relationships with the people they work with (Bion, 1962; Davies, 2010; Gibson, 2013; 2015).

The common thread amongst all the identified articles appears to reiterate the argument put forward by Salzberger-Wittenberg (1970) in the UK context and Milana and Pittalunga (1975) in the Italian context. These authors contend that it is essential for practitioners to carefully consider all the various components and aspects of the social worker / service user relationship. This would certainly involve not only a careful and thorough consideration of the feelings that both social workers and service users bring

to the relationship, but also an honest and meticulous analysis of the conflicts, anxieties, and defences which are an intrinsic part of any working interaction. The depth of knowledge and understanding that will come from such ongoing analysis and reflection can be consequently constructively utilised by social workers to create a stronger working alliance with vulnerable children and their families.

### *2.2.3 Emotions and the working environment: The organisational dimension for Social Workers*

In this section I will present and summarise the published literature that addresses the importance of emotions in the workplace. I will firstly discuss the role supervision occupies in social work practice within children and families' services. I will then briefly summarise the literature that address the relationship between emotions and the working environment. In doing so particular attention will be given to the findings of a series of studies that have studied this relationship from a psycho-social perspective. This section will conclude with some consideration regarding the way in which the broader emotional texture of the child protection system can potentially impact on practitioners' emotional responses.

#### *2.2.3.1 Supervision and Social work practice in children and families' services.*

Within social work literature, there is a growing number of different papers that emphasise the crucial role of supervision in children and families' settings (Goddard and Hunt, 2011; Ingram, 2013; Beddoes, 2012; Rogowski, 2011; Ruch, 2012). Munro (2012) in her review of child protection, repeatedly highlights the importance of supervision in child protection services. A similar argument has been raised by a variety of different scholars such as Goddard and Hurt (2011), Ingram (2013) and Trevithick (2014). Although starting from different perspectives, all these authors strongly advocate for a proper recognition of the emotional dimension of social work practice within the supervisory setting. For example, Ingram (2013) argues that supervision should become a place in which emotions should be freely explored and understood, where the inevitable tensions between practice processes, statutory responsibilities, professional

knowledge and power structures should also be addressed and incorporated into the discussion. A similar argument comes from Trevithick (2014), who strongly advocates for a humanisation of managerialism in which the emotional aspects of social work practice are recognised and openly addressed. Hawkins and Shohet (2000;3) similarly affirm that:

*the supervisor's role is not just to reassure the worker, but to allow the emotional disturbance to be felt within the safer setting of the supervisory relationship, where it can be survived, reflected and learned.*

Ruch (2012; 2014; 2016) has written extensively on the importance of supervision in children and families services and has often emphasised how it can provide a creative space in which supervisor and supervisee could think about issues and address them in the most appropriate way. Beddoe (2013) defines supervision as being a 'highly specific form of professional communication and discourse and is thus both influenced by and has influence on the spaces and places in which it is enacted and spoken' (p.201). She advocates, similarly to Ruch (2007) and Trevithick (2014), for the need for supervisors to create a 'sense of shared responsibility for the effectiveness and safety of the practice' (p.210). More recently, in an article written with other colleagues (Beddoe et al, 2014), she emphasised even further the importance of supervision as a space in which it is important to express a 'wide range of emotions, ideas and frustrations without fear of judgement' (p.119). Caras and Sandu (2014) emphasise the importance of supervision in social work for front-line practitioners' professional development. On the other hand, Rogoski (2011) warns us of the risk that, within children and family services, within supervision, professionals' performances might merely be 'measured in terms of whether tasks are accomplished within the required timescales' with the danger that 'professionals can easily lose sight of what and who they are' (p.164).

Recently, Turney and Ruch (2018) published the findings of a research project where they introduced the CASA (Cognitive and Affective Supervisory Approach) protocol for supervisory discussion to enhance 'the quantity and quality of information available for decision-making by focusing on both the cognitive and affective dimensions of practitioners' experiences' (p.126). The authors provide convincing evidence of the

usefulness of this model for front-line practitioners for its capacity to 'generate unexpected responses' and to 'think in-depth about a case' (p.133). At the same time, however, Turney and Ruch (2018) equally acknowledged how supervisors found it particularly challenging 'to hold thinking and feeling, process and task together, yet it is precisely this idea of a non-binary, integrated depressive position in supervision that the CASA seeks to offer' (p.134). I will return to this particular point later in chapter 7.

### *2.2.3.2 Emotions and the working environment*

In recent years there has been an increase in the number of papers that primarily address the importance of emotions within the workplace from a sociological, psychological and social work perspective. For Ozmete (2004) emotions are considered part of organisational goal-oriented behaviours, which might suggest that professionals, at some point, should either evoke or suppress certain emotions to conform to organisational norms to perform their duties appears to be an intrinsic aspect of social work practice. This particular point of view is reflected in other published studies that emphasise the importance of emotions in the workplace (Grandey, 2000; Stalker et al, 2007; Ben-Zur and Micheal, 2008; Ellet, 2008; Michalopolous and Aparicio, 2012; Mandel et al, 2012;).

Mandel et al (2012) have published the outcomes of a review of the published literature that investigated the experiences of both Emotional Exhaustion (EE) and Job Satisfaction (JS) in child welfare workers. In their review they explicitly acknowledge that the level of EE depends on the context in which the worker operates and on their individual characteristics. Interestingly they contend that:

*it is not the emotional labour on the job that results in EE. In fact, emotional labour can increase JS, especially for women who perceive themselves as working with people effectively. Rather, it is work, or working settings that evoke feelings of anger, irritation and nervousness; work that employee believes cannot be done in the time allotted and work requiring long hours that are more likely to contribute to EE (Mandel et al, 2012;186).*

Although they conceptualise 'emotional labour' in a slightly different way from Hochschild (1983), they nonetheless contend that 'case managers' commitment to the families served and to the philosophy of family preservation were protective factors that decreased the potential for low satisfaction' (p.184). The findings of Gray and Smith's (2008) study on emotional labour in the nursing profession are consistent with those of Mandel et al's (2012) study. Here, nurses reported that, despite the intense emotional demands of their work, the acknowledgment and recognition of the role played by the emotional labour in their daily work, was not only making their contact with patients easier, it often helped patients in disclosing sensitive and emotive information. This, in return, enhanced the potential therapeutic values of their work. Furthermore, Gray and Smith (2008) similarly emphasise how relationships with colleagues can either support and enable nurses to better empathise with their patients or make everything more difficult when professional differences are not recognised and valued. These aforementioned studies clearly highlight the power of emotions in the workplace. Both also provide evidence of how the recognition of the emotional aspects of the job not only increase professionals' job satisfaction but their ability to better support the people they work with.

Although published nearly fifty years ago, Menzies-Lyth's (1960) paper is still extremely relevant for social work practice. In her study she draws attention to the presence in the nursing profession of strong unconscious anxieties mainly due to the nature of the job itself. She then argues that some of the hospital organisational routines could be considered defence mechanisms against those anxieties. Directly drawing from the work of Jacques (1955), she argues that

*a social defence system develops over time as the result of collusive interaction and agreement, often unconscious, between members of the organisations to what form it shall take. The socially structured defence mechanisms then tend to become an aspect of the external reality with which old and new members of the institution must come to terms (p.101)*

Some of the organisational defence mechanisms she identified in her work are: splitting within the nurse-patient relationship; depersonalisation, categorisation, and denial of the



significance of the individual; detachment and denial of feelings, reducing the weight of responsibility in decision-making by checks and counter-checks; the attempt to eliminate decisions by ritual-task performance and purposeful obscurity in the formal distribution of responsibility (Menzies-Lyth, 1960). All these defences, for Menzies-Lyth, are created in order to protect individuals from the anxieties that arise from the relationships professionals create within the workplace. More importantly, although it is true that defences can only be operated by individuals, she equally emphasises how their behaviour 'is the link between their psychic defences and the institution' (p.115). She contends that significant discrepancies between social and individual defences might result in a 'breakdown in the individual's relation with the institution' (p.115) which could result in either an isolation of the individual or in a potential rejection of the individual from the institution. More recently, Hinshelwood (2009) has discussed the effects that unconscious processes might have on an organisational level in educational institutions. In his article, he argues that there are aspects of teaching that have inevitable unconscious routes. He therefore contends that, similarly to Menzies-Lyth (1960) and Miller (2012), if these unconscious processes are not fully recognised, acknowledged and tolerated, they might generate organisational defence mechanisms that 'take the form of cultural attitudes and common practices which may not necessarily enhance the work and in some cases, may actively interfere' with their work (Hinshelwood, 2009;509). However, Krantz (2010) argues that for a better understanding of today's organisations, it is important to consider the role played by information technology and knowledge-based work.

Directly drawing on the work of Bion (1963), Jacques (1955) and others closely related to the British School of Object Relations, a group of scholars and researchers attached to the 'Tavistock' tradition actively utilise psychoanalytic concepts in order to obtain a greater and deeper understanding of the unconscious aspects of the organisational life and the impact those processes may have on individual members as they 'take up' their 'various roles' (Halton, 1004; 18). Developing further Menzies-Lyth's (1960) ideas, a proliferation of studies has been conducted into the relationship between front-line emotional experiences and the working environment from a psycho-social perspective (Obholzer and Zagier Roberts, 1994; Foster, 2009; Noyes, 2015; Cooper and Lees,

2015). The common thread amongst all those studies is the idea that organisations are a 'container of professional anxiety arising from the nature of the primary task (Cooper, 2010;222). By deeply engaging with 'organisational particularities as a basis for general theorising' (Cooper, 2010;219), over the years, a number of studies have managed to point out the way in which unconscious institutional processes can create powerful organisational defences that may impact on the ability of staff to remain in touch with reality and, consequently, negatively affect their ability to fulfil their duties. As Halton (1994) notes, 'central amongst these defences is denial, which involves pushing certain thoughts, feelings and experiences out of conscious awareness because they have become too anxiety-provoking' (p.12). Lees (2014) has evidenced how social workers often fear visiting particular service users and dread being physically and emotionally attacked during their work. More importantly, they also acknowledge that organisational defences can be created not only as responses to the nature of tasks their members are expected to conduct, but also as a consequence of 'external threats such as government policy or social change' (Halton, 1994;12). As will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, social work practice has recently been subject to an unprecedented amount of media and governmental scrutiny (Warner, 2014; Jones, 2014, Shoesmith, 2016) which deeply impact the everyday work of front-line practitioners. In particular, Halton (2015) has recently suggested that the 'obsessional-punitive culture' that currently permeates the care system might have left professionals incapacitated to make 'discretionary decisions by inducing a state of mind of fearful indecisiveness and inaction'. This situation has consequently created a situation whereby professionals believe that 'making a wrong decision is more risky [...] than failing to act at all' (p.38).

Similarly, Cooper (2010) and Cooper and Lees (2015), whilst considering the social defences against anxiety in human services organisations emphasise how, in contemporary practice, 'negative, externally generated boundary conditions' have become much more prominent and affect the overall context of the service delivery. Inevitably, this situation affects the 'organisational space and, beyond this, mental space that is the self of the worker' (Cooper and Lees, 2015;252-253). The TIHR approach therefore appears to be particularly useful in increasing our understanding of

the way in which the broader social changes taking place within the social work and social care arena are impacting on the intensity and nature of the anxieties and defences against them that individuals and institutions put in place (Armstrong and Rustin, 2015).

I will return to some of these ideas in chapter 7.

#### *2.2.3.3 Meltzer and Harris (2013) model of the child-in-the-family-in-the-community*

Directly drawing on the key ideas of the British Objects Relations traditions, Meltzer and Harris (2013) place the family, with all its different configurations, at the heart of their model. They conceptualise the family as a privileged space which can enhance the emotional development of its members by promoting four introjective functions (i.e. namely generating love, promoting hope, containing depressive pain and foster thinking) whilst protecting its members from whoever promulgates hate, sows despair, emanates persecutory anxiety, and creates confusion. They further consider the way in which 'the character of the community influences the structure of the family and thus contributing formative influences for the shaping of the characters of its members (p.51). At the same time, they also contend that their model might enable the way in which the individual's temperament 'operating through his internal situation, shapes his character and impinges on the family, thus influencing his adjustment to the community (p.50). Therefore, if suitably adapted, their model could shed further light on the mutual influences between practitioners' team dynamics and both the external, organisational environment and their own individual personalities. In chapter 4 I will return to some of the key ideas of Meltzer and Harris' (2013) model and the way I have utilised them during the research journey.

#### *2.2.3.4 Emotions and Child Protection System: a difficult relationship*

A closer look at the published literature has evidenced a series of articles that aims to address the complex and ambiguous relationship between emotions and the overall child protection system. In particular, the tragic death of 'Baby P', as Peter Connelly became known, (Warner, 2007; Cooper, 2009; Jones, 2012; Shoesmith, 2016) and the

general media attention that followed, have prompted various scholars to obtain a deeper and better understanding of the 'emotional politics' (Warner, 2014) of child protection and the impact it might have on the everyday practice of child protection workers. Nearly thirty years ago, Harris (1987) acknowledged that the social work profession had been heavily attacked by 'the 'court of public opinion', where some sections of the media have done much to coordinate the 'case for prosecution'' (p.61). For Harris (1987), this negative exposure from the press has consequently produced a set of 'defensive' practices, which are primarily aimed to protect the workers, sometimes even at the expense of the service-users' wellbeing. Similarly, Ayre (2001) has explored the role the media played in creating a climate of general mistrust towards the social work profession. He argues that this has created, in return, a situation in which 'professionals cannot be trusted to behave sensibly unless they're given very firm guidance about what to do' (p.892). This has created a series of new guidance and procedures:

*National government writes guidance for local authorities which then write guidance and procedures for their managers who in turn write detailed instruction for their staff. If anything goes wrong each can say 'I told you what to do and you failed to comply: the fault is yours (Ayre, 2001;893).*

Parton (2014) has written extensively on the changes in child protection in the UK in the last twenty years. In particular, he argues that the increase in the top-down forms of performance management has clearly encouraged aspects of defensive practice. The death of Peter Connelly in 2007 and the public outrage that followed has had a profound impact on social work as a profession. Jones (2014) and Warner (2014) provide a detailed presentation of the role played by the media in increasing the already high level of mistrust towards child protection social workers and their ability to protect vulnerable children.

Similarly, Warner (2014) has provided an account of how the death of 'Baby P' has been 'caught up in the politics-media-politics cycle' (p.158) and not only has reinforced the general mistrust in social work as a profession but has actively contributed to the creation of a binary discourse of 'responsible us' versus the 'incapable them' (p.96).

Interestingly, during this difficult time, the media portrayed child protection social workers as being 'cold hearted bureaucrats' (p.159), who had failed to act on 'common sense' but instead followed bureaucratic procedures; the very same bureaucratic procedures that had been put in place in order to make sure that similar tragic deaths would never occur again.

Developing Warner (2014) and Jones' (2014) ideas, Shoesmith (2016) highlighted in detail the complexity and powerful strength of the polarised narratives that quickly surfaced as a consequence of Peter Connelly's death. She also analysed the 'cultural trope', which she identifies as 'both the cause and effect of the interaction between media, politician and the public' (p.181). She thus considers the public, media and government responses to Peter Connelly's tragic death and the consequent blaming of social workers as the result of highly complex dynamics which have at their foundation 'the persistent denial or disavowal of familial child abuse and homicide, especially when it involves the mother' (p.194). This particular aspect is not only a result of an intrinsic idealisation of motherhood and childhood, but also an unrealistic expectation that social workers can accurately predict and prevent child abuse and homicide. In essence, this cultural trope is a defence against the knowledge that such atrocities might be happening just at the end of our streets, as Cooper (2009) similarly argues.

Whittaker and Havard (2015) have discussed how the introduction of more sophisticated systems of accountability (such as reviews, inspections, audits, etc.) might have played a crucial role in making 'social work practice more defensive' (p.2). In their work they emphasise how the idea of defensive practice appears to have now become 'part of the culture' of the agency (p.14) and therefore a less conscious process but one that might nonetheless impact negatively on the professionals' ability to suitably safeguard and protect vulnerable people. The sharp increase in the child protection referrals following the entrance of the 'Baby P' story in the public domain might be further evidence of the defensive approach used by local authorities to protect themselves. The emotive tone of the current child protection system in England has caused a significant increase in the number of interventions and services that they provide, which allegedly are for the protection, safeguarding and empowerment of

vulnerable families. Instead, they are frequently put in place more for the protection and safeguarding of professionals and organisations (Whittaker and Havard; 2015). This is an aspect that will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 5 and 7.

#### *2.2.4 Conclusion*

This literature review provides compelling evidence of how the complexity and multidimensional components of emotions and feelings affect all aspects of social work practice. At the same time, however, the relationship between emotions and social work practice appears to be a 'double edged sword'. It is undeniable that emotions, if suitably acknowledged and understood, might play a crucial role in developing a closer and supportive relationship between social workers and service users. On the other hand, if those emotions are not suitably recognised and contained, they might create further and sometimes insurmountable barriers to partnership working.

The current review highlights how, in recent years, there has been a gradual but steady move towards what Cohen (2001) defines as the 'cognitive revolution' (p.42). Despite the wealth of literature which considers the emotional aspects of social work, the vicissitudes of the unconscious and the role they play in shaping both the nature and intensity of the emotions front-line practitioners experience in their everyday work appear to be overlooked. The work of Grant and Kinman (Grant and Kinman, 2014; Kinman and Grant, 2015), for example, although highly influential within social work literature, addresses the theoretical constructs of Emotional Intelligence (EI) and Emotional Resilience (ER) from a merely post-positivist perspective (Murphy et al, 2012). Similarly, in the work of Ingram (2013; 2015) unconscious processes, although acknowledged, have only been discussed tangentially amongst the more predominant discourses of emotions in social work practice.

A more proactive attempt to take into consideration unconscious processes in front-line social work practice is evident in the work of Foster (2009) and others who have conducted research and doctoral studies within the Tavistock Clinic (Whittaker, 2014; Madembo, 2015; Nosh, 2015; Robbins, 2016).

I present this thesis as part of the current debate that actively takes into account the unconscious dynamics (both on a personal and institutional level) as an active component in shaping professionals' emotional responses to their daily job and the potential implications this may consequently have on their ability to practice safely and competently. Building upon the outcomes of the current review of the literature, in the following chapter I will present and discuss the methodological approach I have utilised for my research project.

### **3 Chapter: Methodology: Psycho-Social approach to multiple case study analysis.**

Neale (2009) considers methodology ‘the rationale and philosophy underpinning the study design and its execution, including the researcher’s ontological or epistemological perspectives” (p.20). Similarly, Birks and Mills (2011) contend that the ‘foundation of a credible research study’ (p.36) occurs when there is a clear correspondence between the researcher’s personal philosophical position, the main aim and objectives of the research itself and the methodological approach used to achieve those aims.

I will firstly present the core ideas underpinning, Critical Realism, which have informed the overall methodological structure of the current research project and their connections with the main research question and related subsidiary questions. Secondly, I will provide evidence of the appropriateness of the chosen methodological approach in order to suitably address the main research question: a psycho-social approach to case study research. Thirdly, a discussion of the grounded theory approach of data analysis will be included in this section. Fourthly, an in-depth presentation of the methods of data collection alongside their connection with the substantive methodological approach will be given. Finally, a brief overview of some of the ethical aspects that have guided and informed the research project will conclude this chapter. Building on Birks and Mills’ (2011) ideas, and directly drawing on the findings of the literature review, the current chapter will therefore demonstrate the ‘congruence’ of the overall chosen methodological approach of the current research project.

#### **3.1 Critical Realism and its link with the chosen research question.**

Before explaining the core concepts of Critical Realism in more detail, I will briefly introduce two classic approaches to social research, positivism and constructivism, in order to suitably contextualise its core concepts within the broader and often competing discourses of the various approaches to social research.

Moses and Knutsen (2012), amongst others (Wakefield, 1995; Carter and Little, 2007; Welford et al, 2011), contend that, within the terrain of social sciences, it is still possible



to identify two broad and competing approaches to research: naturalism and constructivism. The main focus of the positivist approach is the objective study of 'facts', to uncover recurrent regularities and patterns existing in the Real World. It postulates that the 'knower' or the researcher cannot influence the research process because their position only allows for careful unbiased observation and recording of events. The constructivist approach, on the other hand, contends that individuals do not experience the world in a merely objective manner, but instead perceive it through the lenses of their personal and social characteristics, which are intrinsically elusive and subjectively experienced. Furthermore, those experiences take place within specific social and cultural contexts.

Differently from naturalism, constructivism (or interpretivism) assumes that observations and experiences 'depend on the perspective of the investigator; the outcomes of the investigation are not neutral and not necessarily consistent across investigators' (Moses and Knutsen, 2012;11). The researcher is therefore seen as playing an active role in the co-construction of reality, and their own perspectives need to be fully recognised and explicitly acknowledged as an inevitable influence on the process and outcomes of the research. Because this approach postulates 'ontological diversity and complexity' (Moses and Knutsen, 2012;10), it encourages researchers to draw on a variety of different sources and often includes empathy and constructive reflection as useful tools which can offer a deeper understanding of the contextual and cultural aspects of the subject of the investigation.

Over the last few decades, however, a third and new perspective has been slowly developing alongside naturalism and constructivism: Critical Realism (CR). This approach, or philosophy of science, while fully acknowledging the existence of an objectively independent 'Real World', equally recognises that 'there can be many layers to the reality' which researchers study, and that their access to the one 'Real World' is highly complicated' (Moses and Knutsen, 2012;12). CR postulates that reality is both 'intransitive (existing independently of humans and their experiences of it) and stratified' (Mingers, 2000;26). Bhaskar (1998), contends that one of the first forms of stratification is between structures (which generate events) and mechanisms (the range of events that are essentially experienced). Reality, or the world, is thought to be 'made up of

complex and highly stratified realities (ontologies)' (Longhofer and Floersch 2012;205) each of them intrinsically inter-connected to one another: the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical.

*The empirical domain is where observations are made and experienced by observers. However events occur in the actual domain and may be not observed at all or may be understood quite differently by observers. There is a process of interpretation that intervenes between the two domains. Events occur as a result of mechanisms that operate in the real domain. It is not the case that the real or actual cannot be observed but simply that it may not always be capable of being observed. We see just the tip of an iceberg but that doesn't mean that the invisible three-quarters is not there or is unconnected to what we see (Easton, 2010;123).*

This particular way of understanding and conceptualising the intricate connections between the different layers of reality, provides a fascinating and compelling perspective that corroborates even further the ideas underpinning both CR as a philosophy of science and the current research project. In a similar way, psychodynamic theories have enabled me to engage, explore, and reflect on the undeniably complex dynamic forces between the world, conceptualised in a positivistic or naturalistic way, and the unique and exclusive way in which they are experienced by individuals. In both psychoanalysis and CR, the production of knowledge is 'always connected to the social worlds we inhabit and cannot be understood independently of the social actors (i.e. workers, and clients, researchers and research subjects) involved in producing knowledge' (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012;507).

These ontological premises (psychodynamic theories and CR) directly shaped my doctoral research. I was interested in how emotional demands, the professional requirements of their role, and the organisational structures of their teams affected how social workers could practise safely and competently to safeguard vulnerable service users. Drawing on the premise that there are different realities or domains that are closely interconnected and interrelated to one another, I resolved to obtain a better

understanding of the inevitable interactions between those domains and the different roles played by internal and external factors.

The research question which developed from this, and which has guided this thesis, is as follows:

*How do members of child protection teams mediate the tensions between the internal emotional demands of their work and the external components of their job (namely their statutory duties and responsibilities and the nature of the professional relationships within their own organisations) in order to practise safely and competently?*

In order to further structure the analysis and provide a framework for the project, subsidiary research questions were developed.

- How did professionals describe, make sense of, and reflect upon their own emotions in their everyday work?
- How did participants perceive the peer-relationships within the team they work in and what role did these relationships play in their ability to cope with the demands of their work?
- How did participants perceive their relationships with line managers and senior management within their organisation?
- What role did managers or managerial processes play in participants' ability to cope with the demands of their work?
- How did participants cope when a conflict between their statutory duties and personal beliefs/values arose?
- To what extent did participants recognize the impact that their emotional responses were having on their everyday work?

### 3.2 A fitting methodological approach: psycho-social approach to multiple case study design.

In this section I am going to present and describe the constituting components of the methodological approaches utilised by the current research project: case study, psycho-social case study and how I have analysed the data collected, in order to fully address the main research question.

#### *3.2.1 Case Study Methodologies:*

Case study methodologies investigate ‘a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between [the] phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident’ (Yin, 2005,13). They facilitate the ‘exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources’ (Baxter and Jack, 2008;545), providing an in-depth description of a particular phenomenon, and either developing or testing a theory (Darke et al, 1998). More specifically, this thesis has adopted a multiple-case design (Yin, 2005), as it allows the study and investigation of a particular phenomenon in different settings (Darke et al, 1998). Multiple case study designs are usually considered more compelling and offer ‘more robustness to the conclusion from the study’ compared with single case studies (Bemgtsson, 1999;2). Within the existing literature (Yin, 2005) there is a shared acknowledgment that multiple-case study design can be utilised to either predict similar results (literal replication) or to produce contradictory results (theoretical replication).

Since the early stages of my research, I was keen to investigate the emotional experience of front-line practitioners in, at least, two different teams in order to explore how differences in team cultures may affect social workers’ emotional openness and professional resilience. The final decision to utilise child protection teams in Italy and England, as the two units of analysis, was mainly due to my own personal and professional background, which gave me a rather unique insight into child protection legislation, policies and main practice discourses in both countries. It was therefore anticipated that by choosing teams in these two countries might shed interesting light on the impact that both the team culture and the ‘politics of child protection’ (Parton, 2014;

Warner, 2014) might have on front-line professionals' emotional and subjective experience of their work. This in return would enable a greater understanding of the reciprocal influences that external and internal factors might have in shaping professionals' emotional experiences (theoretical replication).

Although the current project cannot fully be considered a 'longitudinal study' (Holland et al, 2006) *per se*, it nonetheless had a longitudinal component in its approach to the study of the relationship between emotions and social work practice. McLeod and Thompson (2009) strongly advocate the usefulness for researchers to 'walk alongside' individual or groups over time in such a way that privileges the present in which they are encountered', a 'close-up shot of real lives, with a focus on plot, story line, turning points and defining moments' (p.61). Longitudinal elements allow the researcher to suitably record, study and analyse 'changes of view or action through [a] repeated data collection cycle' (Flick, 2014;128). With this in mind, the research sought to capture the individual emotional experiences of front-line social workers in Italy and England and to accurately record significant events of their individual and professional lives as they unfolded over a substantial period of time.

Case study approaches have often been criticised because they 'are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes' (Yin, 2005;15): it 'is not possible to generalise statistically from one or a small number of cases to the population as a whole' (Stark and Torrance, 2005; 34). Kholi and Dutton's (2010) metaphor for short term work in social work practice might be similarly used for case study approaches:

*Imagine you are by the sea, trying to understand what makes the sea what it is. You have a bucket in your hand. By the sea's edge, you lower the bucket into the water and fill it. You only have a moment or two to do this. Looking at what you have captured, you try to decipher the ways in which the waves around you are similar to and different from the water in your bucket, and whether in any sense you can say that you've 'caught' the sea. The challenge you face is to understand at least some of the breadth and depth of the sea by studying the sea water. There are many layers of thinking that you do and many filters that you use to come to some of the answers. You may reach a number of conclusions,*

*not least that although there are limits to how tides can be measured in a bucketful of seawater, there is something of the essence of the sea that remains (p.85).*

In a similar way, this thesis does not claim any kind of potential statistical generalisation. Instead, it aspires to enhance the understanding of the influence that relationships with colleagues and managers can have in shaping their emotional responses to their work and their ability to practice in a safe and competent manner with children and families.

### *3.2.2 Psycho-social approach to Case Study:*

Psycho-social studies 'emerged as an embryonic new paradigm in the human sciences in the UK' (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009;1) in the 1990s and the origin and development of this field has been traced over the last twenty years in the UK by various researchers (Cooper and Lousada, 2006; Frosh, 2008, Clarke and Hoggett, 2009; Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). While there are various schools of thought in this field, the common thread is, above all, the explicit attempt to bring the social and psychological spheres together, with an unambiguous assertion that one cannot exist without the other. Rustin (2008) for example stresses the importance of creating 'an education and academic space in which the psychological and the sociological can be brought together, outside the control of either of the two main parent disciplines' (p.407).

Personally, one of the main motivations for adopting a psycho-social approach was that it gave me the opportunity to consider and understand the complexities of practitioners' emotional experiences alongside the cultural and organizational cultures within which they operate. I was subsequently drawn to practice-near research approaches (Froggett and Briggs, 2009) because of their potential ability to convey 'the smell of the real' (Cooper, 2008;432) and therefore to fully and thoroughly communicate the 'aliveness of participants' experience [...] beyond and below' (Hollway, 2008;462) the stories they could narrate. Such approaches create a space where it is possible to observe, describe, understand and make sense of the way in which professionals' complex intra-psychic dynamics encounter and meet the equally intricate inter-relational dimensions of the organisational structure in which they operate.

Psycho-social studies similarly utilise psychoanalytic thinking as a theoretical framework through which 'subject positions can be explored without necessarily having recourse to assumptions concerning the stability of selfhood or the separate sphere of the 'personal'' (Frosh, 2005; 308). Psycho-social research not only actively encourages researchers to be highly reflective about their practice (Hollway, 2009) but, by fully recognising the inevitable influence the unconscious dimension might have on the content and nature of the data collected, actively encourages researchers to take into consideration their countertransference responses throughout the entire research process (Parker, 2010; Schmidt, 2012; Holmes, 2014). It is important to note the different strands within psychoanalysis as these have differing influences. Within the British tradition, two main forms of psychoanalysis have dominated psycho-social research: 'Kleinian and relational psychoanalysis have influenced notions of 'intersubjectivity' and the Lacanian psychoanalytic tradition has contributed to the poststructuralist tradition of discursive constructivism (Frosh, 2010; 194). In recent years, some contested debates have taken place amongst some of the key proponents of the psycho-social approach to social research (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008; Hollway, 2008) as a consequence of the different conceptualisations these perspectives have of subjectivity and subjecthood (Frosh, 2010).

Although an in-depth presentation and discussion of these fundamental issues, or 'disagreements' within psycho-social studies is beyond the scope of the current thesis, it is nonetheless important to consider how different theoretical positions influence not only substantive methodological decisions on the research designs, but also the way through which the data collected is considered, analysed, and presented. The second part of the current chapter will discuss in greater detail the various methods of data collection utilised for the current research project.

One of the inevitable consequences in moving very close to the emotional experiences of our research participants is the potential risk, as Cooper (2009) suggests, of 'losing our minds' (p.432). Although the ability to capture the emotional experiences of the research participants is undoubtedly a strength of this particular approach, the researcher needs to continually strive not to lose a sense of where the boundaries are between themselves and other people. I will return to this particular point in chapter 7.

Finally, the use of a psycho-social approach appears to be particularly appropriate to suitably capture the 'complexity of particular' (Cooper, 2009;439) and to provide a good understanding of the multi-layered components of the psycho-social work we inhabit. As 'each and every situation or context is unique and particular...[it] must be understood – 'apprehended' in its own terms' (Cooper, 2009;440). The case study approach (Yin, 2009) chosen for this thesis offers a good opportunity to include 'thick descriptions' (Hollway, 2009;378), and consequently obtain an in-depth understanding of the emotional experiences, challenges and inevitable dilemmas front-line social work practitioners encounter in their daily work. This, in turn, provides invaluable material that can be used to critically appraise current dominant practices and discourses in children and families' services.

### *3.2.3 Understanding participants' experiences 'inside and outside' their narratives: the 'Listening Guide' (Doucet and Mauthner; 2008)*

Whilst deciding on the most appropriate approach to data analysis, I initially considered adopting, in this thesis, a purely Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) to data analysis. GTA can be defined as the 'discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analysed in social research' (Urquhart, 2013;16) rather than using the data collected to prove or disprove some theoretical ideas in deductive analysis (Charmaz, 2006). By anticipating that the theory will naturally emerge from the data collected, CTA was considered a good example of inductive analysis through 'constant comparison' where the meanings and 'construction of concepts' (Urquhart, 2013;17) remain under analysis and examination.

However, when I started gathering the data, I eventually realised that by adopting a psycho-social epistemology I was already approaching the data with a particular lens. I, therefore, questioned the appropriateness of my original ideas of using a purely GTA. At this stage, whilst debating how to best approach the data, I found particularly informative the suggestions brought forward by Doucet and Mauthner (2008), which appeared to be congruent with the ontological and epistemological ideas that underpin this research project. Doucet and Mauthner (2008) indeed provide useful guidance in the process of data analysis without limiting the flexibility and the emergence of



theoretical ideas grounded in the data gathered, which is usually considered to be one of the main strengths in qualitative data analysis. In their article, they argue that by conceptualising participants as 'narrated subjects' researchers might be able to overcome the impasse on whether subjects are 'located in or constituted by social-cultural and discursive contexts' (p.400). Starting from the premises that 'it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities (Somers and Gibson, 1994;58-9), they address the important question of what can be known about 'subjects inside and outside their narratives' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008;407). Drawing from the work of Stanley (1993), Doucet and Mauthner (2008) contend that 'narrated subjects' 'are constituted by the narrations of selves and others' (p.403). At the same time, they equally acknowledge that there is a 'deep subjectivity beneath accounts and that, if we worked diligently and reflexively, we could indeed come to know it' (p. 404). They subsequently suggest that one of the ways through which narrated subjects can be 'accessed interpreted and written about' (p.403) is by adopting a step by step guide which can offer researchers a 'way of working reflexively with both critical and constructed subjects' (p.404): the Listening Guide.

In the next chapter, I discuss in greater detail some of the difficulties I encountered during the fieldwork alongside a concrete example of how I have utilised Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) Listening Guide in order to obtain a better understanding of Kathryn's story (chapter 6).

### 3.3 Methods of data collection:

Methods are usually considered to be 'techniques for gathering evidence' (Harding, 1987; 2). What follows is a discussion of the inter-disciplinary theoretical framework that has informed data collection, in order to capture the complex domains and realities involved in the emotional experience of child protection front-line practitioners. In this section I will link the chosen methods of data collection and the substantive methodological approaches described and presented in the first part of this chapter.

### 3.3.1 *In-depth semi-structured interviews:*

These were aimed at obtaining 'rich and detailed information' (Rubin and Rubin, 2012;46) regarding participants' subjective meanings on the researched topic. The main purpose of the interviews was to fully capture the domain of the *empirical* (Bhaskar, 1998), which is the 'domain of experience where observations of events are made' (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012;501). These interviews were carried out at various stages of the data collection period with various participants as outlined below:

1. At the beginning of the research project, an in-depth interview with the Team Manager to capture their understanding of their managerial approach to how they support their team members to satisfactorily meet the professional statutory duties and responsibilities;
2. Four in-depth interviews with three front-line practitioners on a regular basis with the aim of understanding how those practitioners described, made sense of, and reflected upon their own emotions.

Although the first interviews had broad, open ended questions (see appendix 7), the follow up interviews were conducted utilising some principles of the FANI (Free Association Narrative Interview) interview as described by Hollway and Jefferson (2012), which allow 'interviewees to follow the thread of their emotional experience as they transform it into freshly discovered meaning' (p.151). As Kvale (1999) has highlighted, this kind of approach to research interviewing emphasises the 'interrelational nature of knowledge' (p.100), allowing the unconscious dynamics to freely intrude into the participants' narratives. Furthermore, the longitudinal component of the research gave me the opportunity to carefully and gently introduce some aspects of data analysis during the data collection stage. This particular aspect raises important ethical and methodological issues (Hogget et al, 2010; Lapping, 2008) which will be addressed and discussed at the beginning of the data analysis chapter.

### 3.3.2 *Psychoanalytically informed Observations*

These were conducted according to the Tavistock Clinic (Miller et al, 1989) method of undertaking infant observations, which was originally developed in the early 1950s as part of the child psychotherapy training at the Tavistock Clinic in London

The observation method has, more recently, been adapted to organisational analysis (Armstrong, 2005; Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2005) to provide a 'qualitative case-based and in-depth method for studying the extra-discursive alongside what people say' (Hollway, 2008;3). The observer's attention should therefore be directed to:

*three things: the objective events happening; the emotional atmosphere; and his/her own inner experiences, the whole area of what in the psychoanalytic setting would be called 'countertransference'. All these areas of observation together reflect the qualities that make up the 'culture' of the organization* (Hinshelwood and Stogstad, 2000;22).

From a practical point of view, this method requires the observer to write up their observations as soon as possible after the end of the session. Observers are then strongly encouraged to record an accurate sequence of the events as they recall them. The purpose of undertaking observation using this approach within this doctoral research was to obtain an understanding of the *real* domain, which refers to the generative mechanisms (Sven, 2005;3) otherwise called 'structures, powers, mechanisms, and tendencies of objects' (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012;501) that have 'potential powers to produce effects' (p.502).

For my thesis, the following psychoanalytically informed observations were conducted in each team:

1. The same three front-line practitioners who were interviewed individually were also observed during four supervision sessions with their managers/supervisors. These observations were aimed at focussing on practices and relationships as they were enacted.

2. Each team was observed during their team meetings and discussions four times. The aim of these observations was to capture the nature of the relationships existing within each team (or case study).

### 3.3.3 *An interactive Activity.*

Team members were asked to participate in an adaptation of the FLS (Family Life Space) activity. As the name of this activity suggests, the original idea was that, through the use of this interactive tool, it was possible to graphically represent the structure and nature of the 'family' relationships. Lewin (1951) argues that an individual 'life space' comprises the entirety of facts and events that influence their behaviours, which are therefore considered to be the result of interactive forces within the field. He summarised his understanding of human behaviours using a mathematical formula (Lewin, 1936)  $B=f(P,E)$ , B refers to behaviour, P to person and E to environment. This model therefore postulates the existence of an intricate, highly complex field of interactions in which the:

*behaviour has to be derived from a totality of coexisting facts, and these coexisting facts have the character of a 'dynamic field' in so far as the state of any part of this field depends on every other part of the field (Lewin, 1952;25).*

Mostwin (1980) extended the idea of a Life Space to family relationships. He therefore considers the "Family Life Space" as the bio-psycho-social environment in which the physical environment and emotively relevant psychological events interact with one another to create a psychological field in which individuals' experiences are shaped and can be suitably understood. As a research tool, the FLS activity enables the researcher to obtain a good understanding of the degree of cohesion and congruence within family members. Furthermore, it gives the opportunity to understand whether members agree (or disagree) on their reciprocal roles, functions and positions within the family. Finally, it also offers a good way to graphically represent the family structure in terms of the perception each family member may have about themselves, their family, and other significant events/people. From a practical point of view, the FLS activity involves

a series of joint graphic tasks, in which all family members jointly or individually partake, and which allows for observation and information gathering on the nature and processes of existing communications (Tamanza and Gozzoli, 1997). Within systemic family therapy, the FLS can be utilised as a diagnostic or therapeutic tool with the entire family or just with individual family members (Greco, 2004).

Directly drawing on the ideas of Lewin (1951), Mostwin (1980) and Geddes and Medway (1977), conceptualising the identified child protection team as a 'dynamic field' (Lewin, 1952), offers us the possibility of exploring its structures and interaction utilising the FLS as a diagnostic interactive activity. By asking the entire child protection team to take part in this activity it was anticipated that a similar greater understanding of the structure and nature of the relationships amongst team members could be obtained.

The intention was that careful observation of how the Team members interacted with one another during the activity, alongside the analysis of the drawing itself, would provide further useful insight into the real domain (Bhaskar, 1989).

#### *3.3.4 The researcher reflective notes.*

My initial proposal was to also gather auto-ethnographic notes in which the 'textual visibility of the researcher's self' (Anderson, 2006; 384) could stand out and become one of, if not 'the' core aspect of the entire research process. During the data collection stage, however, I came to realise that although I was inspired by some of the key aspects of auto-ethnography, I was collecting reflections and accounts of my thoughts, my memories, feelings and perceptions I experienced throughout the field work rather than proper auto-ethnographic notes. Similarly to the auto-ethnographic process, I wrote my notes in the first person (Patton, 2010) with the expectation that I would then be able to find a connection, throughout the entire research process, between my own personal and cultural experiences and the one of the research participants.

Ellis and Bochner (2007) describe this process as follows:

*I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life (p.737)*

As the above quote suggests, the collection of my thoughts and feelings that arose as part of the fieldwork, has been an arduous task. It forced me to maintain a high level of introspection and an ongoing self-questioning that, at some points, had been quite difficult from an emotional point of view: 'honest auto-ethnography exploration generates a lot of fears and doubts – and emotional pain' (Patton, 2000; 88).

I considered that a substantial auto-reflective component of the data gathered might support me to take into full consideration the potential role of my various 'selves' not only during data collection, but also during the sense making stage (Lorenz, 2016).

This situation has certainly resonated with me throughout my entire research process. I have become aware of the various 'selves' which might have impacted on the nature of the data collected. As will become more apparent in the data analysis chapter, including my reflective notes as one element of the research design has enabled me to make my several 'selves' visible through this research journey, surfacing my counter-transferential responses so that they were available for in-depth analysis and scrutiny (Frosh, 2010; Hollway and Jefferson, 2012; Holmes, 2014; Parker, 2015;).

### 3.4 Ethical implications:

Ian and Holland (2014), directly drawing on the work of Butler (2002), have highlighted that social work practice has a lot in common with social work research. In particular, they argue that the ethics of social work research 'should be compatible, if not coterminous with the ethics of the profession more generally' (Ian and Holland, 2014;103).

Ethical clearance was sought not only from the University of Sussex, but also from the University of Bedfordshire, where I work as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work. In addition to this, further ethical approvals were sought from the two Local Authorities that had agreed for their employees to participate in my research project.

The process of seeking ethical approval from several ethics committees undoubtedly forced me to carefully consider at the planning stage the potential ethical issues associated with my research project, especially in terms of respect for the participants, right to withdrawal from the research, preserving confidentiality and anonymity of participant, and, if observed, the reporting of abusing of unethical practice (Mertens and Ginberg, 2007). However, reflection on ethical issues and conflicts is an ongoing process and does not end once clearance is gained.

As will be discussed in greater detail in the next few chapters, I initially struggled in finding teams willing to take part in my research (see chapter 5). When I eventually found team managers in both countries interested, I emailed them the Information Sheet (see appendixes 4-6) containing the aims and objectives of my research and asked them to forward everything to their team members. I then joined each team during one of their weekly meetings and further explained to everyone my research and how I intended to collect the data. Team managers in both countries decided to leave their practitioners the freedom to decide whether they wanted to participate or not in my research. Luckily, three practitioners for each team agreed to become the main participants. Their line managers forwarded me their email addresses and I then arranged to meet each of them individually. Once confident that they were happy to become the main participants in my research, they signed the consent form (see appendix 7). Team managers in both countries alongside all the other team members agreed to sign the consent form in which it was clearly outlined what their involvement in my research would have been for them.

As will become more apparent in the next chapters, throughout the entire period of data collection I had to deal with some 'difficult moments' in which I found myself quite unsure about how to proceed from an ethical point of view. Interestingly, nearly all of those 'difficult moments' were linked to my field work within the English context which

was characterised by substantial difficulties in gaining access to participants. In particular, two out of three participants, despite repeatedly verbalising their initial willingness to take part in the research, were difficult to get hold of, either cancelling several meetings at the last minute, or even simply not being there when I arrived at the Local Authority offices to observe some supervision sessions. I often wondered whether, by either cancelling our meetings at a very short notice or without even letting me know that they could no longer meet me, participants were somehow trying to covertly indicate that they did not want to be involved in my research any more. Therefore, I often felt torn between the desire to respect the participants' pace and availability and the fear of not being able to complete the fieldwork. After every cancellation or missed meeting, I always reminded participants of their right to withdraw from the research if they wished to. However, they always confirmed their desire to continue in the research. In chapter 5 and whilst presenting Kathryn's story I discuss this particular point in greater detail, where I argue that I later realised that my own struggles to get hold of participants could have been considered as a re-enactment of undigested and unacknowledged organisational dynamics.

Dealing with those difficult situations forced me to maintain an open and reflective approach and will be discussed in greater detail in the data analysis chapters (see chapter 5 and 6). Furthermore, at the end of the fieldwork I faced another ethical dilemma. Whilst the fieldwork progressed, I soon came to realise that I was gathering a vast amount of relevant and rich data, which in return forced me to carefully consider how to make the best use of it. In particular, during the writing stage of this thesis, I had to carefully ponder what level of information it would have been sensible to include or not in my discussion in order to guarantee participants' anonymity. Potential issues around anonymity had originally been discussed with each participant at the beginning of the data collection stage, especially with team managers in both countries. Due to the nature of their role, I was upfront in acknowledging the difficulties in guaranteeing their full anonymity (Kaiser, 2009). I, therefore, invited them to take this limitation into consideration throughout the entire fieldwork. As will become apparent in chapter 6, I have deliberately omitted any personal or professional background information that could have made it easier for the reader to identify research participants. I have also



modified some of the participants' characteristics in order to further protect their anonymity without altering the ultimate meaning of the data presented.

In chapter 6, I present, discuss and reflect on some of the contradictions and difficulties concerning some of the professional relationships I observed within each team. Now, I would like to clarify another crucial point, which is highly relevant from an ethical perspective. Front-line practitioners and managers who took part in this project provided strong evidence of their knowledge and competence as child protection workers. At some point, however, I could not avoid noticing that powerful and controlling organisational and team dynamics (Obholzer and Roberts, 2009) could temporarily affect some of their ability to actively utilise their wealth of knowledge and experience. For example, in Giorgia's story I lengthily and candidly discuss some of the difficulties I encountered in my relationship with her. I nonetheless hope that I still managed to convey, in my analysis, my utter respect for a professional who gave me privileged, honest and direct access to her emotional experience as a front-line practitioner. Similarly, within the English context, when discussing Amanda's role as a new team manager I tried to reflect on the struggles she might have been experiencing due to her precarious position whilst covering for Shirley (see Kathryn's story). In the next few chapters, practitioners' stories have therefore been presented with their inevitable contradictions, paradoxes and ambiguities with the purpose of conveying the 'smell of the real' (Cooper, 2009;432) of their experiences. Indeed, it is important for me to acknowledge that it was from these contradictions and complexities that I gained the most valuable learning. At the outset of the fieldwork, I promised participants that I would do my utmost to present an accurate account of their experiences. At the same time, I also sought their permission to include in this thesis my own understanding of their views. I now hope that I have succeeded in sufficiently protecting their identities and, if any of the research participants were to read this thesis and were able to recognise themselves, I am confident they would accept (although with ambivalence) my interpretation of their experiences.

## **4 Chapter: Data Analysis**

In this chapter I am going to present the way in which I have approached the data to make sense of the practitioners' stories and the observations I have collected as part of this research. I will begin by introducing some of the initial difficulties I encountered throughout the fieldwork which compelled me to repudiate my initial decision to use a more bottom-up approach to the data analysis. I will then present the timeframe of data collection—in both the Italian and English contexts. Thirdly, the discussion will then focus on the way in which I have utilised Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) 'Listening Guide' in order to make sense and analyse practitioners' emotional experiences. Finally, the chapter will conclude with some considerations on the way I have utilised the content of my reflective notes to obtain a deeper understanding of the emotional experiences of the research participants during the fieldwork

### *4.1 The experience of the field work: what really happened.*

In my research proposal (Poletti, 2014), I had originally anticipated that the data would be gathered over a period of eight months. Naively, I had not foreseen the amount of difficulties (or 'powerful resistances' as would be more appropriately to define them now) I would encounter even before beginning the fieldwork. More importantly, I never predicted the impact those difficulties would have on some of the substantive methodological decisions I would later adopt regarding the data analysis.

As discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, I initially struggled to find child protection teams willing to take part in my research. Senior managers in a couple of Local Authorities I had initially approached verbally expressed their interests in my research and confidently assured me they could easily identify practitioners who would be willing to participate in my research. Unfortunately, neither of those managers ever replied to any of the emails or even returned any of the calls I had made after our first meeting. Due to these difficulties, for a substantial amount of time I questioned whether I would be able to even begin the data collection.

I was therefore particularly relieved when I eventually found practitioners, in each country, happy to become participants in my research. Unfortunately, I later came to realise that the sense of precariousness and uncertainty, which permeated the beginning of the fieldwork, would become a constant, underlying theme throughout the entire data collection stage. Three additional incidents further undermined my confidence that I could complete my fieldwork as I had originally planned and increased my sense of frustration.

The first incident took place just after the beginning of the data collection within the English context. During our initial interview, the team manager, Shirley, informed me that she would be soon going on maternity leave as she was expecting her second child. Despite her reassurance that 'this is not going to affect your research at all', I was nonetheless concerned about the inevitable impact her absence would have on the entire team and, rather selfishly, on my ability to complete my research.

Whilst I was trying to understand the potential implications of Shirley's imminent departure for her maternity leave, when I next arrived in Italy to complete the second set of data collection, I noticed that Mara, the Italian team manager, was pregnant too. When I approached her at the end of the team meeting I had observed, she confirmed that she had planned to take maternity leave 'in a couple of months. Unfortunately, I won't be here for the final part of your research'.

The final incident took place right in the middle of the fieldwork. Just a few weeks after Shirley went on maternity leave, the Local Authority in which I was conducting my research was subjected to a four-week inspection by Ofsted<sup>4</sup>. At that time, and during the weeks that immediately followed the Ofsted inspection I often doubted that I would be able to complete my fieldwork within the English context mainly due to my ongoing struggles to remain in touch with the research participants who often failed to reply to my emails and phone calls.

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<sup>4</sup> **Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)** is responsible for inspecting educational, childcare, adoption and fostering agencies alongside the initial teacher training.

The fieldwork was therefore scattered by a sequence of unforeseen events that affected the way in which data was collected. Within following sections, I will firstly present how the data was collected within the Italian and English context followed by a discussion of the way in which these unforeseen events have impacted on my original decision to adopt a Grounded Theory approach to the data analysis.

#### *4.1.1 Data collection in Italy*

Within the Italian context, after our initial meeting, I was made aware that professionals rarely received individual supervision, but that instead the designated forum where professionals could either talk about difficult situations or share how they felt regarding their work, was the weekly team meeting discussions. Although professionals could request individual supervision (either with their line manager or with other professionals) this would usually happen in *ad hoc* situations, which meant that they were usually arranged at short notice. This arrangement made it impossible for me to observe individual supervisions despite the participants' willingness to be observed. Within the Italian context, it was only possible for me to complete the observations of team meeting discussions.

Fully conscious of the fact that the weekly team meeting discussions were the only opportunity professionals had to share their working dilemmas with the rest of the team or with their line manager, I made the decision not to ask the entire team to undertake the adaptation to the FLS activity (see methodology chapter). Instead, research participants completed the adaptation of the FLS activity individually, during the second interview we had. As discussed later on, there was only one research participant, Giorgia, with whom it was not possible for me to complete the FLS activity. Below I have included an overview of the timeframe when the data was collected within the Italian context.

Team Meeting Discussion	1 <sup>st</sup> Observation February 2015	2 <sup>nd</sup> Observation March 2015	3 <sup>rd</sup> Observation June 2015	4 <sup>th</sup> Observation November 2015
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Team Manager	January 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview			
Participant 1	January 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	March 2015 2 <sup>nd</sup> Interview + FLS activity	June 2015 3 <sup>rd</sup> Interview	November 2015 4 <sup>th</sup> Interview
Participant 2	January 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	March 2015 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview + FLS activity	June 2015 3 <sup>rd</sup> Interview	November 2015 4 <sup>th</sup> Interview
Participant 3	January 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	March 2015 2 <sup>nd</sup> Interview	November 2015 3 <sup>rd</sup> Interview	January 2016 4 <sup>th</sup> Interview

#### *4.1.2 Data collection in England*

The process of data collection in England was much more difficult and problematic and did not go as smoothly as I had originally planned. Discussed in detail in the data analysis chapter, Shirley's maternity leave and the Ofsted inspection played a major part in my struggle to gather the data, alongside the fact that one of the research participants was off work for health reasons for more than three months.

Despite the difficulties I encountered, it was nonetheless possible for me to engage the entire team in the adaptation of the FLS activity, which happened just before Shirley went on maternity leave. In addition to this, it was also possible for two of the research participants to complete this activity individually, which provided additional relevant data.

Unfortunately, due to the length of the fieldwork, although I managed to interview all participants four times as anticipated, I could not complete all the required observations of supervision sessions with two of the research participants. One of the participants

moved to work for a different Local Authority, which made it impossible to complete the four observations. The third participant, instead, was moved to a different team, within the same LA and with a more managerial role, which meant that she did not receive individual supervision anymore.

Below here I provide an overview of the timeframe of when data was collected in the English context.

	June 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Obs Supervision	January 2016 2 <sup>nd</sup> Obs Supervision	March 2016 3 <sup>rd</sup> Obs supervision	May 2016 4 <sup>th</sup> Obs supervision
Participant 2	June 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	September 2015 2 <sup>nd</sup> interview + FLS activity	April 2016 3 <sup>rd</sup> Interview	June 2016 4 <sup>th</sup> Interview
	July 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Obs supervision	April 2016 2 <sup>nd</sup> Obs supervision	June 2016 3 <sup>rd</sup> Obs supervision	
Participant 3	July 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview	October 2015 2 <sup>nd</sup> Interview	July 2016 3 <sup>rd</sup> Interview	October 2016 4 <sup>th</sup> Interview
	August 2015 1 <sup>st</sup> Obs supervision	October 2015 2 <sup>nd</sup> Obs supervision		
Team Manager 2	February 2016 1 <sup>st</sup> Interview			

Due to the high level of uncertainty and unpredictability I experienced throughout the data collection stage, towards the end of the fieldwork I repudiated my original ideas of utilising a Grounded Theory Approach to data analysis, and defensively favoured a more 'top-down', deductive attitude. I found myself wanting to utilise the core ideas of a paper, originally written by Meltzer and Harris in 1976 (Hahn, 1994) titled 'A psychoanalytic model of the child-in-the-family-in-the-community' (See chapter 2). I was drawn to their model for its ability to simultaneously take into consideration not only the complexity of a person's mental life, but also the continuing and reciprocal influences between their individual selves, their family dynamics and the community in which they live in shaping their emotions to either enrich or impinge their personal development. Only after careful consideration, a lot of reflection and some useful discussions during workshops at the University, I came to realise that my desire to utilise the Meltzer and Harris (2013) model was mainly due to my need to satisfy my quest for certainty whilst confronted with a highly unpredictable and uncertain situation. It also became clear that by imposing an *a priori* model negatively constrained narrative understandings of the data. I will return to this point in the next few chapters.

#### 4.2 Data Analysis: the 'Listening Guide'

Once the potential constraints and limitations in only using the Meltzer and Harris (2013) model to analyse the data collected were acknowledged, I was then confronted with another crucial methodological decision. In the previous chapter, I discussed how I had initially considered adopting a purely Grounded Theory approach and my subsequent decision to inform my data analysis using Doucet and Mauthner (2008) ideas. I also argued how the core ideas that underpinned their approach to data analysis were congruent with the ontological and epistemological premises of this research. without limiting the flexibility and the emergence of theoretical ideas grounded in the data gathered. They offer a practical step by step guide which can allow researchers to obtain a better understanding of the 'narrated subjects both inside and outside of narrative' (p.399). They actively encourage researchers to undertake at least four multiple and consecutive readings of the interviews 'each time listening in a different way' (Brown, 1998;33) which 'intertwine reflexively constituted narratives, relational narrated subjects, and constructed and critical subjects' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008;405). It is also important to point out that I have simultaneously utilised the transcripts of the collected data (i.e. interviews, observations of team meetings and supervision sessions, etc.) and also listened several times to the audio recording of the participants' interviews and supervision sessions as well. The decision to utilise the audio recordings was supported by the desire to retain an emotional closeness to the research participants and maintain alive, during the data analysis stage, the 'smell of the real' (Cooper, 2009;432).

I will now outline the various readings I have completed as part of this research and the way in which they have subsequently informed my data analysis as suggested by Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) ideas.

##### *a) Reading Relational and Reflexively constituted narratives*

As Doucet and Mauthner (2008) emphasise the first reading makes an initial attempt to understand 'what is happening here?' (Charmaz, 2006). During this first reading, I made an active attempt to obtain an understanding of what were the chronological sequence of events, the main identified characters, and recurring words, according



to the participants' narratives. At the same time, I also utilised the reflective notes I had kept throughout the research journey to identify any potential links between the participants' narratives and the thoughts, feelings and emotions I experienced during the fieldwork.

*b) Tracing Narrated Subjects*

During the second reading, my attention was focussed on the way in which participants spoke about themselves and, more importantly, the way in which they spoke about their emotions. Following Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) suggestion, I also tried to identify 'those places where the respondent shifts between 'I', 'we', 'you' or 'it', which can signal varied meanings in the respondent's perception of self' (p.406). This was a crucial step in understanding participants' selves and their emotional experiences as they emerged both inside and outside the narratives.

*c) Reading for relational narrated subjects*

The third reading 'of interview transcripts is a reading for social networks, and close intimate relations' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008;406) as it embraces the notion that all narrated subjects 'are understood as intrinsically relational and as part of networks of relations' (p.406). This stage of the data analysis was particularly useful in constructing and understanding research participants in relation to other subjects (i.e. colleagues, line managers, other professionals, service users, etc.).

*d) Reading for Structured Subjects*

During the fourth and final reading, I mainly focussed on 'structured power relations and dominant ideologies that frame narratives' in an attempt to 'link micro-level narratives with macro-level processes and structures' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008;406). Somers (1994;620) defines this process as the creation of 'conceptual narratives', which seek to 'reconstruct and plot over time and space the ontological narratives and relationships of historical actors, the public and cultural narratives that inform their lives, and the crucial intersection of these narratives with other relevant social forces'.

#### 4.2.1 Example of data analysis using the 'Listening Guide': Kathryn's first interview

In this section I am going to present the way in which I have analysed Kathryn's first interview, initially utilising Doucet and Mauthner (2008) listening guide. I chose to present an excerpt of Kathryn's first interview because, after careful reading, I came to realise that it contained most of the key themes that would emerge in our subsequent interviews. I hope that, by including this brief example of the way I approached Kathryn's first interview, the iterative and reflective process I have utilised throughout the data analysis will become evident.

As suggested by Doucet and Mauthner (2009) I have utilised different colours in order to highlight aspects that were relevant to that particular reading (see appendix 2). I then created a table in which I included Kathryn's words on the left column alongside my initial thoughts and feelings in response to her sentences on the right column (see appendix 2). Whilst looking for relational and reflexively constituted narratives I made a conscious attempt to address the crucial question 'what is happening here?' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008;405).

During this first reading it became apparent what kind of strategies and coping mechanisms Kathryn was utilising while trying to deal with the emotional demands of her daily work. As it transpires from the table included in appendix 3, during our encounter, Kathryn often stressed the importance of being emotionally '*detached*', which she utilised four times in such a brief extract. As discussed within the literature review chapter, Klein argues that individual continuously fluctuates between two different states of mind or perspectives, the paranoid-schizoid position and depressive positions (Segal, 1988). In this brief section of our first meeting it was already possible to note, despite an inevitable glimpse of a more retaliatory attitude ('*they're not having any of them, that's it! And rode over the high ground of unicorn of righteousness*'), that Kathryn attempted to maintain a more balanced approach and carefully considered the feelings and emotions of the people she works with ('*I wouldn't say he was happy but he visibly relaxed*').

When reading back records of our first encounter, attempting to trace narrated subjects, (Appendix 3) Kathryn's strong internal emotional resources clearly emerged in her own

narrative, which allowed her to not only state what she particularly enjoyed in her work (*'I quite enjoy doing court work'*), and to acknowledge how she felt from an emotional point of view (*'I sort of feel most strongly about is when sometimes you feel you're constantly criticised'*), but also to firmly but gently speak her mind, even when this meant disagreeing with her own manager (*'I said "I don't agree with that and I'd like it logged and why", just in case it ever comes back, that they'll know that wasn't my decision'*).

When looking for relational narrated subjects, it was evident how, at the beginning of the fieldwork, Kathryn was part of a strong network of close relationships. It was evident in her multiple use of the pronouns 'we' (we were stuck then with this dilemma', we had a good laugh') 'our' (*our manager tends to play devil's advocate*) in her sentences, which suggests a strong sense of belonging to her team, which she clearly perceived as being supportive and reliable.

During our first encounter, there was little evidence in Kathryn's narrative, of 'structured power relations and dominant ideologies' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008;406). As discussed in detail in chapter 6, these aspects became more predominant in the second part of the fieldwork. In this first encounter Kathryn mainly hinted at the difficulties and criticisms she had been exposed to in a situation she had been working with by the court and the children's guardian (*'We had argued interminably with the guardian, with the court, that the children may need to be split if we couldn't find a placement for three of them'*). At the same time though, she reiterated the strengths of the relationship she had created with her own manager, Shirley (*'you can talk it through and it's all right to feel like that'*).

Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) Listening Guide has also been extremely useful in supporting me in finding useful connections and relationships between the various themes and across the data set. This in return has facilitated the 'theory building' process. I later drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance on inductive forms of thematic analysis, in order to 'searching across data set – be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts – to find repeated pattern of meaning (p.15).

In chapter 6, whilst presenting Kathryn's story in more detail, I will further develop some of the themes and ideas presented in this section.

#### 4.3 *Unconscious Dynamics and Data Analysis: a Cautionary Tale*

Within the methodology chapter, great emphasis was placed on the fact that my research relies on the ontological assumption that unconscious processes play an important role in shaping the everyday emotional experiences of front-line child protection practitioners. Transference, countertransference and projective identification are amongst some of the psychoanalytic concepts that psycho-social researchers have been actively utilising in an attempt to bring to the surface interviewees' emotions and/or thoughts that might have been either forgotten, repressed or denied (Andersen, 2012). Psycho-social studies, as a field of inquiry, encourage researchers to carefully record their own emotional and behavioural responses as additional sources of crucial information (Schmidt, 2012; Hunt, 1989; Frogett and Wengraf, 2004; Cooper and Lousada, 2005) that can potentially provide 'useful indicators of what might be going on for the subjects of the research' (Lucey et al, 2003;380). As discussed within the methodology section, I have carefully documented my own emotional journey throughout the entire research journey anticipating that this material could provide complementary and additional evidence that could enable the exploration and understanding of what lies 'beneath the surface' (Clarke and Hoggett, 2009). Before proceeding even further in the analysis of the data gathered, it is important to clarify the way in which I have actively utilised the content of my reflective notes and my emotional reaction to the fieldwork in order to obtain a greater understanding of the emotional experiences of the research participants.

Within the published literature, there have been some ongoing and sometimes fierce criticisms made by other social researchers regarding not only the risk of 'over interpretation of data', which can produce 'violent interpretations' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012; xi), but also concerning the use and application of psychoanalytical ideas 'outside the clinic' (Steiner, 1995; Frosh, 2010). Within this rich and stimulating debate, Holmes (2013; 2014) convincingly argues how, in psycho-social research, the

researcher's counter-transferential emotional and behavioural responses cannot and should not be considered in isolation, but instead they should be carefully considered alongside the 'actual data' gathered during the fieldwork with 'an open mind and not assume that they have been projected from the participants' (Holmes, 2014;179). Similarly to Holmes (2013), Long (2014) highlights the intersubjective component of concepts like transference, counter-transference and projective identification. Whilst discussing the use of the Kleinian concept of 'projective identification' (Klein, 1952) within a psychotherapy supervisory setting, he provides some examples whereby the use of this clinical concept can sometimes be utilised defensively in order 'to rationalise the therapist's subjective state' (Long, 2014;2).

Ogden (2004), clarifies this particular point further, by arguing that:

*in projective identification, analysis and analysand are both limited and enriched; each is stifled and vitalised. The new intersubjective entity that is created, the subjugating analytic third, becomes a vehicle through which thoughts, feelings may be felt, sensations may be experienced, which to that point had existed only as potential experiences for each of the individuals participating (pp.189-190).*

For these authors the use of the researcher's emotional responses can become an important source of evidence and additional data that can help the unearthing of some important unconscious dynamics although this should be taken *cum grano salis*. Those emotional responses should therefore be considered as the result of an inter-relational psycho-social field. During the fieldwork I made an attempt to create an open and ongoing conversation with the research participants in which I occasionally shared my own experience and how I felt, which often fostered a stronger working alliance and enabled me to unearth some interesting unconscious dynamics. I will discuss in detail this aspect of my work in the following chapters.

The ideas of Holmes (2003; 2004), Long (2014) and Parker (2010) during the data analysis phase, have been taken into full consideration. As will become clearer throughout the next chapters, an ongoing attempt has thus been made to triangulate the intensity, nature and origin of the researcher's emotional experiences with the nature of

the emotional experiences that participants have conveyed through interviews and observations of their practice.

With this in mind, in the second part of this thesis I will firstly begin by presenting some of the differences that emerged during the fieldwork between the emotional texture of the child protection setting in both Italy and England and the way in which have impacted on the research participant.

In chapter 6, I then focus my analysis on the emotional experiences of three research participants: Kathryn and Ann from the English Team and Giorgia from Italy. Their stories are exceptional in the way they offer the unique opportunity to bring to the surface the complexity of the relationship between practitioners' emotional experiences, the working environment and predominant social work practice discourses.

## **5 Chapter: The emotional texture of Child Protection Systems in Italy and England: some differences**

In this chapter, I will focus my discussion on the differences in the emotional texture of the child protection systems in the two countries: Italy and England as they have emerged during the fieldwork. As will become apparent, the aim of my presentation and discussion is to bring to the surface the main differences in how the ‘emotional attitude’ of the child protection system has impacted on the emotional vicissitudes of the research participants in each country.

As discussed within the literature review chapter, both Turner (2005) and McNaughton (2013) suggest that although emotions are ‘physiologically determined and internally experienced’ they are nonetheless ‘the result of socio-cultural practices’ (McNaughton, 2013;72). Obtaining a greater understanding of the complexity of the relationship between front-line practitioner and the emotional texture of the wider child protection system in which they operate is particularly important for this research as it will enable a better contextualisation of Kathryn’s, Ann’s and Giorgia’s story, which will be presented in the next chapter.

The chapter will conclude with an analysis of the impact the differences in the emotional texture of the child protection systems may have had on the participants’ ability to share and discuss their emotional experiences.

### **5.1 Emotions and Child Protection System in England**

Finding practitioners in England willing to take part in the research had been a much harder task compared to Italy. All the Local Authorities (LAs) I had initially approached either declined or even failed to acknowledge my phone calls and emails. In a couple of instances, where I eventually managed to speak with senior management, they raised concerns that not only were practitioners ‘quite busy’, but also that ‘it was not the right time’ because some of these organisations were going through major organisational restructuring. At that time, a sense of despair and sadness began taking over my own

thoughts and feelings. I occasionally wondered whether I would ever be able to recruit any participants in England. Therefore, I was highly relieved when I eventually found members of a child protection team willing to take part in my research. However, when I first met the team, whilst explaining that I had originally planned to gather the data over a substantial period of time, one of the team members made a rather 'prophetic' joke and stated:

*well, you need to pick your participants very carefully, we might not be here in eight months' time.*

At the end of this meeting, I experienced a high sense of uncertainty and mistrust, which somehow clouded my excitement and happiness at finally being able to start the fieldwork. Unfortunately, I experienced similar concerns later on when I seriously doubted that I would be able to complete the data collection as I had originally planned to. Uncomfortable feelings of frustration, precariousness and a general sense that 'my research was too much' therefore permeated the beginning of the data collection in England. Rustin (1988) describes the anxieties observers could encounter at the beginning of their observational experiences. In particular, she warns about the potential exposure, for observers, to powerful and intense feelings of being drawn 'into an emotional force-field and struggling to hold one's balance and sense of self' (p.10). During my Infant and Young Child Observations at the Tavistock I had already had the opportunity to acknowledge, reflect and, more importantly, understand the impact this range of intense and uncomfortable feelings had had on my own person. Within the context of my fieldwork in England, however, there was something different. Somehow my emotional responses were more intense compared to the ones I experienced during my fieldwork in Italy. I often felt like I were intruding 'beyond the boundary of what is being offered' (Rustin, 1988;10). I thus wondered frequently whether the methods of data collection I had originally chosen were incompatible with the professionals' already busy routines. The frequent struggles to find a quiet and private space where we could conduct our interviews heightened these uneasy feelings even further. For example, with one of the participants, Kathryn, it took us nearly twenty minutes of walking through two different floors before being able to find a place where we could have our first



interview. However, at this time I also started becoming aware of how disproportionate my emotional reactions were. A substantial amount of data was going to be collected through observations of either supervision sessions or team meeting discussions, which were already part of their working routine anyway. Ultimately, participants would have to commit themselves to participate to four interviews, which meant that overall the research would take up to four hours of their working time over a substantial length of time (the fieldwork was completed over a period of sixteen months and not eight as originally planned). Therefore, I initially struggled to make sense of the intensity of my emotional responses, of the feeling that the demands on the participants were too high, and of the equally unsettling sense that I might not be able to complete my research.

On average, the first set of interviews with the Italian participants lasted between fifty-five minutes to an hour. In England, apart from Ann, whose first interview lasted more than fifty minutes, with both Kathryn and Kelly our first encounters were significantly shorter. Neither of their interviews lasted more than thirty minutes. At the end of the first round of interviews with the English participants, I therefore found myself even more concerned and anxious. I often wondered whether I could obtain sufficient data for my research and I had a strong sense that the material I had begun gathering 'wasn't good enough'. In chapter 6, I will discuss in greater detail my initial struggles in creating a constructive working relationship with Kathryn. However, at the end of my first interview with Kelly I was left with an equally intense sense of frustration. I had the feeling that she had given me only some vague, superficial answers. I was unsure whether her interview would be useful for my research as I thought that she had struggled to talk about her own emotions. Once I managed to transcribe her interview, however, I noted unexpectedly that there was a substantial incongruity between my perception of how our first meeting had gone and the actual content of our interview. I had to admit to myself that she had been able to share the way in which work could affect her emotionally in a rather honest manner:

*I find that sometimes I do just cry, not very often but sometimes I think a lot of frustration will build up and it will be a particularly bad case and I'll be on my way*

*home on a long drive and that will be that. Sometimes I get cross just at myself or at something stupid (Kelly, 1<sup>st</sup> Interview)*

Whilst the weeks unfolded, I thus wondered whether the meaning of my emotional responses could be found outside my conscious awareness (Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000). Indeed, two unexpected events which took place during the fieldwork have been surprisingly helpful in bringing to the surface, in all their intensity, some of these highly uncomfortable feelings which emotionally affected both the research participants and myself. The first unforeseen event was the change in the team manager. As mentioned earlier, managers in both countries went on maternity leave right in the middle of the fieldwork and therefore could not participate in the final part of my research. Within the Italian team, this change did not significantly impact social workers' daily routines. All research participants reported that this change had also not affected their work, which continued rather smoothly with no significant changes in their emotional experiences.

It is important to point out that just before the beginning of the fieldwork, within the English context, Jean, the deputy team manager who had worked alongside Shirley for several years, left the team to take up a team manager position within the same LA. During their interviews, all the research participants unanimously reported that they all felt highly emotionally supported and contained when Shirley and Jean were working together. Shirley and her deputy Jean had managed to develop a close and supportive working relationship, as explicitly confirmed by Ann (see chapter 6). They provided alternate supervision to each team member. Shirley would focus on providing managerial supervision whilst Jean would provide a more reflective supervision. Therefore, it appeared that Shirley and Jean were consequently capable of promoting harmony and hope amongst their team members, containing their anxieties, and fostering thinking. Equally, they seemed to have succeeded in shielding and protecting their team members from some of the discussions and decisions that were made at a senior level and that may have negatively impacted the team morale. This was acknowledged by Kelly, Kathryn and Ann during their interviews. Kelly, for example, stated that

*certainly, Shirley and Jean protected us a lot. We weren't necessarily aware of what was happening on a more senior level, they usually deal with that without involving us, so we could just focus on our work (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

Ann spoke fondly of Jean and how she was missing her support. Similarly, Kelly during our final interview bluntly stated that:

*well, since Jean left, I haven't received any reflective supervision anymore*

During our interview, Shirley admitted that Jean's departure had affected the entire team and described how, one day when she was not in the office:

*I was bombarded with phone calls, issues that could be resolved within the team and the social worker had the skills to do that but the anxieties went sky high because [...] it was, 'okay, Shirley not here' because I've got other things that I do ... Jean's left' [...] because me and Jean were very strong in terms of working relationship.*

During the first observation of the team meeting, Jean's name was mentioned several times. It was as if the entire team was coming to terms with an important and significant loss, the loss of a person they had all found to be highly reliable and accessible, which undermined their sense of security.

Probably also due to the recent changes that had taken place within the team, a stronger general sense of mistrust permeated the first part of my fieldwork and it took me longer to create a stronger working alliance in England. During the first half of the fieldwork I struggled significantly in arranging a suitable time for interviews. In hindsight I often wondered whether they wanted me to fully appreciate the depth of the distance that they perceived existed between them and senior management. One incident during my second interview with Kathryn exemplifies the level of mistrust that permeated my relationship with her at this initial stage. During the interview I had asked Kathryn to complete the adaptation of the FLS (see chapter 3). Kathryn actively engaged in completing the interactive activity. She spoke at length about how she perceived the nature of the relationships within the team and the LA and for the first time openly acknowledged some of the issues and contradictions she experienced in her daily work.

At the end of the activity, Kathryn immediately picked up the paper on which the FLS activity had been written on and interestingly I had to ask her twice whether I could have the paper back. Kathryn's lowering of her emotional defences, facilitated by the use of the interactive activity, was quickly followed by a re-establishment of a distant and guarded relationship.

During my second observation of the team meeting discussion, a particularly high sense of uncertainty and anxiety permeated a substantial part of that meeting. This was one of the last team meetings chaired by Shirley. She was expected to go on maternity leave soon. After the team had spent a substantial amount of time discussing the way in which they could help and support one of their colleagues in managing the imminent removal of a sibling group whose parents could potentially become very aggressive something rather interesting happened. The conversation suddenly changed, and a few team members then raised their concerns about their safety because, just a couple of weeks before, their service manager had been physically assaulted by an angry father she had met in the corridor just outside her office. They then spoke about their concerns that service users seemed to be able to easily enter their building unsupervised and how this was undermining their sense of safety ('not even at work, in our offices, we can feel safe now'). I will return to this particular point in chapter 7.

Undoubtedly, the change of Team Manager, Shirley, deeply affected the professional lives of all its members. By the end of the fieldwork, only 3 out of the 14 original practitioners were still part of that team. It is undeniable that this radical change and turnover could be directly linked to the individual managerial style adopted over the years by Shirley, who had been the manager of that team for several years. After all, Shirley herself during our interview acknowledged that 'I think if you asked my team, I'm probably what holds the team together [...] I like to know what's going on because I'm accountable and, again, the team know that I'm accountable'. It therefore transpired that Shirley, with her "hands on" style, played a crucial role in the everyday lives of all her team members. In the next few chapters I will discuss in greater detail the way in which her managerial style affected Kathryn, Kelly and Ann's emotional experiences.

At the same time, it is also important to point out that, a few weeks after Shirley went on maternity leave, a second important and unforeseen event took place. The entire Local Authority (LA) was inspected by Ofsted over four weeks. This was a period where the demands imposed by the senior management on all practitioners were particularly high. As discussed within the literature review chapter, in the last few decades it has been possible to observe a sharp increase in new and more complex systems of reviews, inspections and scrutiny on front line practitioners' work (Parton and O'Brian, 2000; Munro, 2004). The introduction of this intricate system of auditing has certainly played a crucial part in exponentially increasing paranoid feelings amongst practitioners and LAs' social services as well. The tragic death of Peter Connelly (Warner, 2014; Jones, 2014; Shoesmith, 2016) and the subsequent targeted and vicious media attacks aimed at vilifying individual workers and managers have undoubtedly contributed to the increase of these strong and powerful feelings of paranoia. Ann, in her first interview, succinctly summarised those feelings by acknowledging her fear 'of seeing your face stamped on the front page of The Sun'.

The emotional tone within which the inspection took place was clearly described by Kelly and the way she had been told of the imminent arrival of Ofsted:

*We had one of the senior managers running around. She said to me 'where's Amanda? [new Team Manager]. I said 'oh I think she's working from home, but I can ring her. She says she's available'. She said 'well you need to ring her because Ofsted's just been announced'. Then she flapped off and it was like 'OK, if you're stressing that's going to filter. You need to be saying that in a calm way, not like that.*

Ann similarly reported that

*I turned up one Monday morning and the rumour was there [...] so someone said Ofsted is coming in this week and then you suddenly from senior management, we get an email saying 'Ofsted have called, they will be coming tomorrow... blah blah ... they will then pick their cases and you'll know by... I think Wednesday afternoon or something 'they will be meeting you the week after [...] we had subsequent emails and directions coming through.*

According to all the practitioners' narratives, it appears that senior management within the LA had been unable to properly contain the inevitable anxieties that the imminent inspection elicited. In their interviews they described how senior management instead played an active part in sowing despair, stemming persecutory anxiety, and creating confusion (Meltzer and Harris, 2013) amongst their front-line practitioners. Kelly described how

*it was just people flapping around like that, like coming around 'oh Ofsted are...' or when I got told my case had been picked, I'd have one manager come to me and say, 'oh you need to do this', and it was like this, 'you need to do this'. Then I'd get an email from a different manager saying it again. I'd think 'just stop wasting your time, let one person deal with one thing and stop flapping.*

She then lengthily spoke of the frustration she experienced during the Ofsted inspection 'because it's 'let's put on this shiny show for Ofsted. No let Ofsted see it how it is!'. Kathryn similarly described how she felt 'a bit anxious and desperate to get everything updated quickly'.

The Ofsted inspection coincided with the period where I had originally planned, with the team, to collect the third block of data. I was informed of the Ofsted inspection by an email from one of the research participants. It arrived late in the evening and not only did she inform me of the inspection but also cancelled our interview scheduled for the following day. I noticed that the research participant had copied in her Deputy Team Manager in the email, which I found quite strange although I admit that I did not give it much thought at that time. During the four-week inspection, I often found myself wondering what might be happening to the entire team and a sense of concern and apprehension often overcame me.

In the interview that followed the inspection, Ann spontaneously described the emotional tone of the Team Meeting, which took place just after the inspection had been announced, as

*very serious, very anxious, everyone was anxious straightaway because it's again, I think, it's the individual responsibility that if you're picked and you're the one to let the team down.*

Later in the fieldwork, I came to realise how my emotional reactions during the Ofsted inspection somehow mirrored the emotional experiences of the research participants. In the first interview that followed the inspection, all participants spontaneously spoke of the sense of bewilderment, shock and the intense and overwhelming feelings they had experienced at that time. It also emerged how all participants did not feel supported by either the Team or the senior management. Ann explicitly mentioned how:

*the stress slowly builds up and then you have management slowly giving directives [...] when the other directives started coming through and it meant more work, you're then piling anxiety on anxiety and some workers worked till 8.30 or 9 o'clock [...] I am going to get disciplined or anything like that*

More importantly, it was during the first interviews after the inspection that greatly helped me not only in making sense of some of the overwhelming and highly intrusive feelings I had experienced during a substantial part of the fieldwork, but also to realise how profound the participants' understanding of the research aims had been.

In hindsight, the inspection represented an important turning point for the entire research. After this difficult time, all research participants suddenly began to become more engaged in the overall research process. For example, before the inspection, Kelly was very slow in replying to my emails every time I attempted to agree a time for our interviews or when I could observe her supervision sessions. After the inspection the process of identifying suitable times for our remaining interviews was certainly easier.

Similarly with Kathryn, it had been quite difficult to initially identify suitable times for the interviews and I often had to follow up my emails with phone calls in order to get hold of her. As highlighted above, I often felt powerless and at the mercy of the participants who were often unreachable, despite my repeated attempts to get hold of them.

The first interview with Kathryn after the inspection, in particular, represented an important turning point in my fieldwork as it made me realise how most of my emotional reactions closely mirrored the emotional experiences of the research participants. As will be discussed further in the final chapter of this thesis, I slowly came to appreciate how the intensity of my emotional responses was directly related to a lack of sufficient

emotional containment (Bion, 1962; Bollas, 1989) provided to participants by their own teams and organisations.

At the same time, it is equally important to point out that, during the Ofsted inspection, two of the research participants had some of their cases reviewed by inspectors. Interestingly, both participants spoke in positive and constructive terms about this experience. Kelly, for example, stated that her experience of being inspected was:

*fine, absolutely fine, it was just a normal chat, it wasn't like grilling [...] this gentleman ... he literally was just talking about he just wanted to find out, he didn't ask why or prod.*

Similarly, Kathryn acknowledged that 'they weren't bad actually, from my point of view anyway'. She later added that:

*I had a couple of cases inspected and some bits were good, some things weren't actually, I was quite pleased with some aspect of what they said, others I could accept.*

Later on, she further stated that:

*the inspectors I spoke to I felt were more looking beyond the paperwork, from what she was saying about meeting the children and knowing them*

They thus reported a lack of congruity between the paranoid feelings elicited by senior management and the actual experience of having their cases reviewed by Inspectors. In chapter 7 I will argue in detail how this situation could be explained by a lack of sufficiently clear boundaries and protection set out by senior management and a particularly high level of mistrust between LA and Ofsted.

Just after the inspection by Ofsted, LA senior management announced that they had decided to restructure their Children Services provision with an increased focus on relationship-based practice (Barrett-Lennard, 2013). All the research participants, however, appeared to have not fully understood the underlying reasons that had led senior management to bring about this restructuring. In particular, Kelly spoke of her surprise because of the focus on relationship:



*I think that's what most of us in our team have always done. [...] I've wanted to get up and shout this is what we've been doing [...]and now we're being told we have to do it by people who actually don't care about that really.*

This was echoed by all the other research participants, who passively accepted senior management's decision but without fully understanding what had led to these changes.

Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge that a recurrent theme throughout the interviews with all the English participants was the way in which the current regulations and policies heavily impacted on their work. This particular aspect will be discussed further in Kathryn's and Ann's stories (see next chapter).

## 5.2 Emotions and the child protection system in Italy

The situation I encountered in Italy was somewhat different. For example, despite an initial struggle to recruit participants, once I met the practitioners from a child protection team within a large LA in north Italy, after a brief presentation of the aims and objectives of my research, three practitioners immediately came forward and volunteered to participate in my research. At the end of that meeting the overall atmosphere was of excitement and curiosity. Within the Italian context the sense of mistrust that permeated the initial stages of my fieldwork was less pronounced. This could be partly due to the fact that the child protection system is less sophisticated and there are not as many review systems and managerial checks on social workers' daily work. This situation, in return, allows practitioners to fully concentrate on their work in safeguarding vulnerable families. Although it might be suggested that within the Italian context, a higher level of scrutiny and accountability should be put in place, it is nonetheless undeniable how the lower level of paranoid aspects from the community gives front-line practitioners the possibility of focusing their energies primarily on their work.

While there have been incidents where the Italian media have openly criticised social workers, these criticisms have never achieved the same element of public outrage as happened within the British context (Trincia and Rafanelli, 2017). For example, in 1998 the Italian Parliament publicly criticised the way in which some LA social services had conducted the investigations which had led to the removal of several children from their families due to concerns they had been subjected to sexual abuse from a ring of paedophiles. One of the suspected perpetrators was a local priest, who allegedly performed satanic rituals during some of the abuses. More recently, there have been some debates, within some Italian TV programmes which have openly highlighted some poor practice from social services and have negatively impacted the perception of social work as a profession. Despite a similar negative representation from the media, it is undeniable that within the Italian context the level of vilification and criticism of the profession has never achieved the same intensity as was observed following the deaths of either Victoria Climbié (Cooper, 2005; Rustin, 2005; Ferguson, 2014) or 'Baby P' (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2014) or even the Cleveland Inquiry (BMJ, 1988).

Although the emotional context within which Italian social workers operate presented some elements of mistrust similar to the English context, the intensity of these feelings was significantly lower. For example, during her first interview, Francesca, one of the research participants, mentioned how difficult it had been for her when, whilst at home with her son next to her, she typed her name on Google. She found that on a public blog the parents of a child she had been working with had written that she had:

*kidnapped their children, then it was all written in capital letters, my son was very upset because he then asked me 'mum why do you kidnap other people's children?' then he was crying his eyes out*

Although undeniably intense and difficult from an emotional point of view, especially as her own son was exposed to the content of the online blog, Francesca's experience nonetheless highlights how the level of media exposure usually remains contextualised within the geographical area where professionals operate and only rarely reaches a national level.

Within this context, social workers, although undeniably concerned about the potential negative impact that the media might have on their everyday work, equally appear to be more capable of defending their professional reputation. For example, Francesca, one of the research participants, mentioned during her interview that she and a group of her colleagues had sued one of the LA senior management for slander because of what she said during an interview with a newspaper:

*She said that all social workers, we should go back to school, it wasn't nice, not a very pleasant moment.*

During the same interview she added that, following that interview, the Italian professional body had also sued this individual and 'they won as well!'. When asked, she stated that they are planning to use the money they were granted by the Court to pay for some training or to attend conferences.

Whereas in England the overall child protection system with its sophisticated set of auditing checks and control systems has been a strong presence in the participants narratives throughout the entire fieldwork, in Italy the situation was substantially

different. The Italian social workers barely spoke of the way in which child protection procedures and policies affected their work. Although they often voiced their struggles in working effectively with other professionals, similarly to their English colleagues, only Francesca and Giuliana, during our first interviews, mentioned some of the difficulties they had experienced when working with the criminal justice system. In particular when some of the children they had been working with had disclosed sexual abuse. For example, Francesca spoke of the feelings of frustration she once experienced because

*you can't really be fully honest with the family and the child [...] for example you know that the police are investigating them, but you can't really let them know. This is very difficult because it affects the relationship you have with them. It's like the elephant in the room, you feel its presence but can't really talk about that.*

A similar situation was described by Giuliana, who highlighted the impact that 'knowing something without being able to be honest with the child or their family' might have on the intensity of her emotional responses.

In the next chapter, I will be presenting the story of one of the Italian participants, Giorgia, in greater detail: I will argue how her story, and my experience with her during the fieldwork, have been instrumental in enabling me to fully appreciate the influence team dynamics have in determining front-line practitioners' emotional experiences. As will become more apparent later, even in her story, the overall texture of the child protection system in Italy had very little influence in shaping her own emotional experience. The main focus of her narratives, instead, were the internal team dynamics.

Finally, it is important to point out that it transpired clearly from the first set of interviews with the research participants that social workers in Italy seemed to be more able to freely talk about the way in which their work affected them emotionally. Therefore, they appeared to be less 'defended' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012) compared to their English colleagues. As mentioned above, it is also important to note that the length of the first interviews with the Italian participants were significantly longer compared to those I completed in England. I often wondered whether the lesser intensity of the sense of mistrust that permeated the Italian child protection context allowed them more liberty in acknowledging and expressing their emotions, especially the negative and unpleasant

ones. With the Italian participants, it was possible to observe during our first meeting a better ability to share with me the way in which their work affected them emotionally. For example, Marta, the team manager, before going on maternity leave; honestly admitted how:

*this work, it affects you emotionally, you can't sleep during the night before the removal of a child... often after a difficult home visit or difficult removal, as soon as I got home I had to take a shower. I felt the need to take a shower to wash away the experience I had just had.*

Similarly, Giuliana, another research participant, during her first interview stated how

*every time a child discloses to me that he or she had been sexually abused I feel sick. When I am with the child I always manage to control myself, to control my emotions, but when I arrive at home I sometimes vomit. Often, I can't sleep for one or two nights or I get erythema!*

None of the English participants demonstrated a similar ability to freely talk about their emotion, especially during our first set of interviews.

### 5.3 Conclusion

The data suggests that the English child protection system appears to be permeated by more paranoid feelings compared to the Italian situation. It is certainly undeniable that since the death of Peter Connelly (Warner, 2012; Shoesmith, 2016) this sense of mistrust has exponentially increased and this is impacting the emotional experiences of front-line practitioners.

Certainly, the Ofsted inspection represented a time of high uncertainty and unbearable anxieties for everyone within the LA. As explained above, all research participants felt 'uncontained' by the senior management's attitude throughout the four-week inspection. In our first interview following the inspection, Kathryn mentioned how she had heard 'the report doesn't look that good for us'. Indeed, following the publication of the Ofsted report, the LA decided to undertake a radical restructuring of its Children and Families

service provision. In the next chapters I will describe in more detail the way in which both Kathryn and Ann experienced this decision to restructure its entire children and families' services. It was Kelly, however, that helped me in better understanding not only some of the underlying reasons that could have been behind the senior management's decision, but also my own emotional reaction to the fieldwork. During our third interview she indeed mentioned that she felt that 'it looks like Senior Management never took the time to listen to us [...] they don't really know what we do every single day' (3<sup>rd</sup> interview). I will return to this particular point in chapter 7.

Research participants within the English context appeared more 'defended' and consequently more difficult to reach from an emotional point of view. This was probably due to the high level of uncertainty and mistrust that permeates the child protection systems on several levels. Within the Italian context, the presence instead of less paranoid feelings possibly coupled with some cultural differences, allowed practitioners to be more in touch with their emotions, more capable of recognising and also accepting the negative emotions that are an intrinsic part of child protection social work practice. Consequently, this situation, does not promote the creation of defensive practices (Whittaker and Havard, 2016) which appear to have become an 'open secret' in social work practice within the English context.

## **6 Chapter: Participants' stories**

In this chapter I am going to present and discuss in greater detail the stories of three research participants: Kathryn and Ann from England and Giorgia from Italy. Their stories offer an invaluable opportunity to better understand the complexity of the relationship between front-line practitioners' emotional responses to their work and the working environment. This is particularly important because, as will become more evident, the organisational dynamics inevitably play a vital role in shaping the emotional experiences of front-line practitioners either positively or negatively.

Kathryn and Ann's stories will be presented as they comprehensively capture two important although contrasting aspects of the relationship between practitioners' emotionality and the working environment. Giorgia's story, instead, will be presented as a dramatic example of how emotions can not only be used defensively (Long, 2014) but also how undigested, unrecognised and unacknowledged emotions might impact the nature of the professional relationships front-line practitioners develop daily in their work. In discussing Giorgia's story I will refer extensively to the content of my reflective notes. This will be instrumental in unearthing important unconscious organisational dynamics that can be re-enacted and thus 'housed' (Morgenroth, 2010;268) within the research encounter.

Each participants' story will be followed by some considerations that will be utilised as the basis for the discussion in the following chapter.

### **6.1 Kathryn's story: resilience and working environment. A difficult relationship**

When I began the fieldwork, Kathryn was amongst the most experienced members of the team and was highly valued by Shirley, the team manager and her colleagues. Just before the end of my data collection Kathryn had found a new job in a different Local Authority.

As briefly discussed in the previous chapter, Kathryn, although volunteering to take part in the research, initially struggled to engage. At the end of the first interview I found

myself doubting whether I would be able to get sufficient material from the interviews with her as her answers were rather short and vague. For example, when asking her what kind of emotional responses she experienced in her daily work she briefly stated:

*I suppose the whole range, but I think you need to remain a little bit detached from what's going on otherwise there's got to be someone there to sort things out.*

When I later asked her the way in which these emotional responses affected her work she just added: *'I don't know there!'*. She then continued saying:

*I think you have to have a bit of emotional detachment from that, that's work, not home and not your personal life, otherwise you'd be constantly having a breakdown! I have to detach a little bit and say, 'let's sort this out because everyone is looking to you to sort it out.*

I will discuss Kathryn's 'emotional detachment' later. Despite this initial sense of distance which characterised my first encounters with her, what I found particularly interesting about Kathryn was her ability to always consider each situation, issue or dilemma, from the standpoint of the people she worked with. Amongst all the research participants Kathryn was the practitioner who constantly and consistently included in her narratives the service users' point of views and the complexities of their own individual situations. Only Giuliana, in Italy, demonstrated a similar ability. With Kathryn, I often found myself thinking back to Meltzer and Harris' (2013) description of the adult state of mind, which closely resembles Klein's description of the depressive position state of mind (Segal, 1988). According to this tradition, this state of mind, or part of personality, 'tends to view every activity as a form of work meant to be useful to those dependent upon it' (p.85). Indeed, when Kathryn spoke about her own emotional responses to her work, she always considered them alongside the ones of the people she worked with. For example, whilst talking about a child she had been working with who had recently been separated from his siblings, she spontaneously stated that:

*I can't imagine what it must be like for him and to wake up and there's none of his family there, it was just him and the foster carers. How dreadful must that be?*  
(1<sup>st</sup> Interview)



At the same time, not only was Kathryn able to consistently consider the inevitable complexities of the personal and familiar situations of the people she worked with, she also had a unique ability to powerfully convey, within either the supervisory setting or in our interviews, convincing images of the various children she worked with. At the end of my first observation of her supervision, in my reflective notes I explicitly mentioned how impressed I had been at her ability to bring alive, within that context, clear images of the various children and parents she had worked with and to 'hold them in her mind' so to speak. It is impossible to suitably convey within this thesis the effect of Kathryn's tone of voice every time she spoke about one of the children she had worked with, which always changed depending on the child's age, sex, etc.

I will now present three examples in which Kathryn succeeded in bringing alive not only her own work with young children, but also her natural ability to emotionally attune to the experiences of the people she worked with.

For example, during the first supervision session I observed, she spoke of a conversation she had with a child a few days before:

*I said to him the other day, 'When you're there, I could see you getting more and more angry while you were there, you were getting tighter and tighter, if we'd have been there for a couple of hours, there would have been an argument and you probably would have bopped A (his sister), or shouted at her or shouted at Mum' and he said, 'No I wouldn't', I said 'like at the contacts, we would like to make contact so it's unsupervised but both of you behaving like that isn't on'. He said, 'I felt weird that time'.*

During the second supervision, instead, whilst talking about another child she had met a few days before she stated:

*He's fine, he's doing so well, probably about a year or so ago or even less you'd go in and he'd be sitting there and he'd go, 'Kathryn, Kathryn!' and you'd go over to him and he wouldn't know what to do. But now he'll say, 'Kathryn come here, look at our puzzle'.*

During the third supervision session I observed, whilst talking about a home visit she had only completed a few hours before:

*A So you've visited this morning?*

*K Today, yeah.*

*A How was K (child's name)?*

*K She's lovely, she was fine, she's about 8 months now. [...]*

*A What about attachment with Mum?*

*K Attachment with Mum, it's okay, not bad but very, very positive with Dad.*

*A Why is it so different with Mum?*

*K I think she's a bit more detached.*

*A Mum is, for any particular reason?*

*K I think she's lost all her other children and I think she's more, she's all right when she's little, I'm sure she loves her.*

*A You'd think that if she'd lost all her other children, that she'd be more ..?*

*K They're R, L, O (children's names)*

Kathryn's emotional resilience undoubtedly rested upon her ability to 'learn from experience' (Bion, 1962) which always involves a person's ability to think about an emotional experience (either positive or negative) that will eventually produce a change in personality. As Meltzer and Harris (2013) have summarised, it is essential that individuals might be able to modulate their mental pain, which is 'accomplished primarily by [...] actions which may successfully modify or adapt to the external world or internalise new qualities into the internal object which comfort or strengthen the personality (p.19)

It was therefore possible to observe in Kathryn a strong sense of purpose in her work, which led to her to try to constructively regulate her emotions to meet the expectations set up by her own internal objects. During our final interview, Kathryn spoke about an ex-colleague who, despite working within a different team, had been a positive and supportive mentoring figure for her and who had recently left the LA and his absence

was greatly felt: 'I still miss him'. Often, during our interviews, Kathryn referred to previous working situations and what she had learnt from them especially from an emotional point of view.

*I have been more determined that we're going to get it right. I suppose it's frustration really because like in this case I remember two years ago this exact situation happened.*

As briefly touched upon at the beginning of this chapter, during her interviews, Kathryn often spoke of her need to be 'a little bit detached' in her job. Towards the end of the fieldwork, I came to realise that her 'being detached' referred to her need to be able to modulate the intensity of her emotional responses, rather than not be emotionally involved in the situations she worked with:

*It can be difficult, but I think I've said actually you have to be a little bit detached. Because I know from a personal point of view if I've got to talk about something that's perhaps difficult for me emotionally and the other person is going 'Oh dear!' and getting all emotional, I find that very awkward. Because I know they can't sort it out, do you know what I mean? If you were the doctor who's crying say, they you think, 'we're onto a loser here'. (2<sup>nd</sup> interview)*

This ability to modulate the intensity of the emotional experiences increases the likelihood of 'learning from experience' occurring alongside the enhancement of the ability of professionals to empathise with the service users' situations (Braescu, 2012). At the same time, it enhances the possibility for individuals to integrate the new emotional experiences into their personalities to reinforce even further the strength and cohesion of their internal objects.

It is also important to point out how the rest of the team appeared to rely on Kathryn's emotional resilience, and her ability to soothe the intensity of the emotional demands of their work. For example, in the middle of my fieldwork, Kathryn went on annual leave for a couple of weeks; during this time the entire team had to deal with a very difficult family situation. There were concerns that some family members could potentially become violent if the High Court decided that the children could no longer continue to live with their parents. Since the parents were known to the Police, they were also actively

involved in supporting Social Services. However, the level of anxieties around this particular situation increased sharply in intensity and deeply affected the entire team resulting in some of Kathryn's colleagues being so concerned about their safety that they struggled to sleep at that time. When Kathryn returned to work, she was rather shocked at how anxious and concerned her colleagues were:

*I'm not sure what happened [...] I thought, 'What's been going on?' And then June<sup>5</sup> came and she went, 'Oh Kathryn, I'm glad you're back, you can help me. We can bring things down now, we've got some sensible people back'. [...] Yeah and I think that had kind of got out of hand. [...] it's not the Bourne Identity. In real life, you don't go around like this and the whole building blows up, that's only on telly. (2<sup>nd</sup> Interview)*

During one of our interviews, Ann, who was also away on annual leave at the same time, pointed out that she had similarly struggled to understand what had happened during their absence from work and confirmed that 'everyone was happy to see Kathryn and me back at work'.

However, as Meltzer and Harris (2013) suggest the adult state of mind or the adult part of the personality, guided by the quality and nature of its internal objects, 'may agree to take orders up to a point' (p.84) although they might struggle to be fully obedient. This is one of its greatest weaknesses: the struggle to accept 'the random factors operating in the outside world' (p.85).

From the first observed supervision, it became clear that even though emotionally robust, Kathryn nonetheless struggled with aspects of her work that she did not consider particularly relevant. One of these aspects was updating case files on the system. The following extract of an amusing conversation between Kathryn and Shirley during the first supervision I observed, clearly highlights her attitude towards the 'paperwork':

S     *And the rest of the children's file's not up to date.*

---

<sup>5</sup> A colleague

*K: Is it not?*

*S: I'm going to slap your head in a minute.*

*K: When was the last one then?*

*S: You've put nothing in since our last supervision in terms of what you've done.*

*K: Since when?*

*S: I'll show you now.*

*K: Whose case, which one is that, all of them?*

*S: M (one of the children), because I did a file audit on the 1st June on our supervision, and all it is, is supervised contacts that are on here.*

*K: Oh yeah okay, I'll put it on...*

*S: Just for your benefit it's part of my role to do these file audits within supervision unfortunately as you know.*

*K: I'll come to you afterwards and go, "was I the only one that got that?"*

*S: No, you're not the only one that gets it I'm afraid.*

*K: I'll steal the tape.*

During the following supervision I observed, which took place after the Ofsted inspection, the issues of Kathryn's case file not being up to date came up again, although there was a more accusatory tone in Amanda's voice (she was the new team manager at that time):

*M It's just being mindful on that last management oversight, there were some bits that need, some case notes ...*

*K Yeah, I think I did a visit and I just put "LAC visit" and its half a sentence there and it's tailed off ...*

*M Yeah.*

*K Yeah.*

*M We obviously didn't do any cases, did we?*

*K What do you mean? Oh no, we didn't, I don't think we did, I think we've had a chat about the various times, so it feels like it was the last time because I've talked about a couple of things this week that we didn't meet the other day.*

In her job, Kathryn preferred to prioritise her direct work with children and their family sometimes at the expense of keeping updated records on the system. The joke she made during my first observation ('I'll steal the tape') highlighted how she was fully aware of her own weakness. In our interviews, Kathryn raised some interesting points on the way in which the recording system was getting in the way of her direct work with her service users (Whittaker and Havard, 2016). Kathryn therefore struggled to passively accept aspects of her role, particularly when they impacted on her direct work with children and their families. I will return to this point later whilst discussing Ann's story.

However, it was not just Kathryn's ability to answer all the questions her managers asked of her or her ability to genuinely demonstrate gratitude towards some colleagues, managers and other professionals that intrigued me. Since our first encounter, Kathryn appeared to be able to voice her opinions and thoughts even when they differed from those of either her colleagues or managers. Even during our first interview, whilst talking about a time where she had disagreed with Shirley, the manager, she commented:

*... and I said, 'I want it logged on my supervision that I didn't agree with that and why'*

Similarly, in the following interview, whilst talking about some difficult inter-agency meetings she had attended a few days before where she had disagreed with two IROs (Independent Reviewing Officer):

*You say it's unfeasible and they say it needs to be done. Other professionals perceive you must do that, whereas it's not. Like this lad for example [...] the IRO in that case was quite bullying and bullying towards the family [...] I was sort of going, "It's not actually your call, that's not actually for you to say, that's not*

*lawful. I could see the minute taker sort of smirking [...] they overstep the boundary.*

During our final interview, Kathryn once more highlighted her struggle to passively accept the inevitable issues professionals encounter in creating effective inter-agency working relationships, mainly since the various agencies involved in a situation might have different and conflicting priorities:

*I had a rant this morning about a case where I've come in for a lot of criticism because they were saying, the reviewing officer, they had lots of drift and delay but actually it was a case where on the other side of it, this child hasn't been matched long term because of funding and also because Fostering [...] So it kept going on for months. I don't know why it came down to us to be criticised but it was 'Why isn't this done?', and then the carer is now expecting and so the panel won't match it whilst there's such a big life event going on. (4<sup>th</sup> interview)*

This provides further evidence of how Kathryn's work was supported by a strong sense of purpose which in turn rested on the strengths of her internal emotional resources, which fostered her ability to think and promote hope.

The changes that had taken place within the team following Shirley's maternity leave, the Ofsted inspection, the departure of some of her long-term colleagues and, above all, the realisation that her promised promotion to senior practitioner would not happen any time soon played a crucial role in prompting Kathryn to seek new work opportunities elsewhere. At the beginning of our third interview, a few of weeks after the Ofsted inspection, whilst talking about all the changes that had taken place since I had begun my fieldwork, she immediately stated:

*Yes, I am leaving actually ... I am going to [different LA]*

Whilst talking about the reasons that had led her to apply for different jobs, Kathryn at one point mentioned that she felt unsupported and that it was not safe anymore for her to disagree.

Kathryn then mentioned how this lack of sufficient support was resulted in an increase in the number of supervisions that got cancelled at the last minute and, jokingly, added

*You know they have! They do actually, yes*

In the same interview, she later acknowledged that:

*it is all fine but you feel a bit adrift, do you know what I mean? It's not a shared responsibility anymore.*

It therefore appeared that for Kathryn, the changes that had taken place not only within her team but also within the broader context of LA, had made her slowly realise that she was alone, 'on my own'. As briefly discussed earlier, Kathryn acknowledged that Shirley, her long-standing manager, was more capable of acknowledging, recognising and tolerating differences:

*I sometimes disagreed with her on some situations, but she's a manager after all, so she has to look at other aspects. I'd usually ask for my opinion to be recorded, and that's it! And I knew that if something ever happened she would stand by me, she wouldn't leave me alone: she had a good overview of all the cases, you could go to her and although she might not remember the details of every situation, she'd know what I was talking about.*

Following the Ofsted inspection and with Shirley's absence, this sense of shared responsibility and, more importantly, of belonging slowly but steadily disappeared. Amanda, the new team manager, who was covering for Shirley during her maternity leave, unfortunately could not have the same overview her predecessor had regarding the various cases.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the restructuring of the entire Children and Family department announced by senior management following the Ofsted inspection could not easily be understood as a rational and thought out decision in order to improve their services provision, but more as a defensive attempt to control and master a highly uncertain, intimidating situation. In our third interview, Ann summarised how the increase in this sense of uncertainty and mistrust were impacting the everyday work of front-line practitioners:

*I think we'll just be hammered more, what I've got the impression, the IROs were [...] criticised for not being appropriately challenging so now, they challenge every*



*blooming thing regardless of how minor it is which is really irritating. [...] yes, but you can challenge things,[...] doesn't have to be criticising, it can be 'you did that well'.*

The exponential increase in the sense of uncertainty and persecution within the LA played a crucial part in Kathryn's decision to seek alternative employment. After the publication of the Ofsted report, I often sensed that the strong sense of purpose in Kathryn work and her own independence, which had always been one of her strengths, were probably now perceived negatively by the organisation. Bion (1962) has pointed out that in groups and organisations, when the basic assumption mentality takes charge of the situation the person who maintain a more balanced attitude may be perceived and singled out by the rest of the group as being uncooperative, disloyal and a potential threat for the stability of the entire organisation.

What appeared to be particularly challenging was to reconcile the feedback about her work from her manager, senior management and from other agencies she worked with:

*It's been like being in a parallel universe where you go to court and you've got the judges, two or three judges and barristers going, 'sterling work, really good work, I'd like to say this case hasn't been easy but it's been managed very well , I'm very impressed with the local authority' and then you come back and it's like, 'you haven't done the life story work, why haven't you linked it in with this, why is this visit out of time?'<sup>6</sup>*

In the final interview, she further stated how she was aware that it had:

*happened to other people, it's the feeling of being taken for granted. That you're okay, 'You can do this removal can't you?', 'you don't have to go to half 2 in the morning, you'll be okay', 'Why weren't you at your meeting at 9 o'clock the next morning?', that sort of thing, [...] it's not necessarily being acknowledged for being good because I know some of the stuff I've done hasn't necessarily been that good. (4<sup>th</sup> Interview).*

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<sup>6</sup> See Ann's explanation on page 107

Even at this stage, in Kathryn's narrative, there was a genuine attempt to maintain a more balanced view of the situation, and not to project all the blame onto the organisation or senior management by acknowledging and conceding that 'some the stuff I've done hasn't necessarily been good'. Despite being highly valued by her colleagues, Kathryn did struggle to obtain a similar level of recognition within the supervisory relationship. During my final and third observation of her supervision session I often wondered whether Amanda, who was only covering for Shirley temporarily, could have been somehow intimidated by Kathryn's competence, her ability to speak her own mind and to voice her own opinions whenever they differed from hers. What is undeniable, is that there were some uncomfortable and uneasy feelings within the supervisory setting. The beginning of the third supervision I observed, clearly captures the level of this uneasy atmosphere. After briefly going through the agenda for the supervision Amanda asked Kathryn

*A Well, how are you doing?*

*K oh, yeah.... I am fine, thank you [laugh].*

Kathryn then turned towards me and added 'it's always weird when you are watching'. In this instance, Kathryn seemed to be genuinely surprised and startled by Amanda's question as if she had not expected it. At the same time, my presence as an external observer would certainly have increased the level of anxiety in an already difficult encounter. Later in the same supervision, another interesting event took place, which clearly summarises Kathryn's sense of loneliness she experienced at that time. Whilst Kathryn was talking with Amanda about a family, at one point she visibly smiled. Then Amanda asked her

*A Why are you smiling?*

*K This was the one where when we took it on, it was for K (s social work student) to do the matching report, do you remember? Actually it had never been agreed, it had never been to panel that CAMHS was raising some big concerns about the carer's ability*

Amanda had clearly forgotten about the conversation she had previously had with Kathryn, who in return could not hide her feelings. Before we proceed even further, however, it is important to point out that it would be an over-simplification to just consider Shirley's maternity leave as the sole reason why Kathryn had decided to change job. Amanda was certainly more at ease during the supervision with Ann as will be discussed in greater detail later. It is however important to remember that Amanda was herself in a very delicate and precarious position. Not only was she temporarily covering for Shirley, who had been managing that team for a long time, but it appeared that Shirley herself, although on maternity leave, was still a substantial presence within the entire team. During our third interview, Kelly jokingly commented that Shirley had 'never left'. The above points certainly contributed to the creation of a difficult situation whereby Kathryn and Amanda could not effectively and satisfactorily work together.

#### *6.1.1 Key learning points from Kathryn's story*

As touched upon within the literature review chapter, in recent years, there has been a proliferation in the production of literature that addresses the importance of emotional intelligence and emotional resilience for social work practice (Morrison, 2007; Collins, 2007; Grant and Kinman, 2013; Ingram, 2014). From a psychodynamic perspective, an emotionally intelligent and resilient professional can be considered as someone who could rely on good internal resources, which can foster and encourage their ability to think and to promote hope. Since their sense of security is built internally, he or she is able to tolerate extreme environmental shifts, peace and war, happiness and tragedy, health and illness' (Meltzer and Harris, 2013;85). These internal resources enhance a person's ability to suitably understand his or her feelings and those of others, allowing them to obtain a more realistic and rational understanding of the external reality. Furthermore, it is expected that a person who can rely on a strong inner emotional security is better able to modulate the intensity of their emotional responses, which in return can enhance their ability to make prompt and effective decisions to suitably safeguard vulnerable people (Morrison, 2007; Braescu, 2012; LeBlanc et al, 2012).

Kathryn could be considered to be an emotionally resilient professional. Colleagues often sought her advice and emotional support whilst dealing with difficult and complex situations. During her first interview, Ann spontaneously mentioned that a few days earlier Kathryn had volunteered to accompany her on a difficult home visit, and to work till very late in the evening to support her. Ann explicitly acknowledged that she had felt reassured by Kathryn's presence. Similarly, Kathryn had a good ability to learn from experience (Bion, 1962) and to be able to control and modulate the intensity of her emotional reaction to her everyday work (Braescu, 2012; Meltzer and Harris, 2013). In addition to this, for Kathryn, the wellbeing and safety of the vulnerable people she was working with was paramount and a constant theme throughout the fieldwork. Her story, therefore, highlights the complexities and contradictions of the relationship between social workers' emotional resilience and the organisational defences within which they operate. It warns organisations of the potential risks they may encounter if the level of their defences become too rigid. If the organisational and social defences become too rigid and powerful, directly interfering with the sense of purpose in their daily work and their own professional development, emotionally resilient professionals might struggle to compromise their own practice, which ought to meet the expectations of their internal objects. I will return on this particular point in the next chapter.

## 6.2 Ann's story: the importance of a supporting working environment.

Ann was the first practitioner within the English team who came forward and volunteered to become one of my research participants. During my first encounter with the entire team, I had noticed that Ann appeared to be particularly interested in my research. In the first interview, Ann was, amongst all the other English participants, the one who was more prepared to talk about her own emotional responses to her work. Ann had recently completed the ASYE<sup>7</sup> and therefore was the less experienced participant in my research. In addition, Ann had been the one English research participant who always promptly responded to my emails and with whom it had been relatively easy to arrange suitable dates for our interviews. More importantly, Ann was the only research participant with whom I managed to complete all four observations of supervision meetings as I had initially planned.

Just before the end of my research, Ann was promoted to senior practitioner. Here, I will reflect on the various factors that have contributed in supporting Ann's growth into a confident and competent practitioner despite the undeniably adverse external circumstances – the very same difficult working environment that had led Kathryn to seek alternative employment.

As stated above, amongst the English participants, Ann was the **one** who appeared to be more capable of talking about her emotions. For example, during the first interview she spoke about a situation whereby a family member of one of her cases suddenly and unexpectedly died. Although this person's death was not related to social services' involvement, Ann nonetheless felt:

*guilty, was it my fault? It wasn't but obviously because we were involved, I thought is there anything we could have noted, anything we missed [...] at the time, for the two weeks after, I was really elevated, really anxious about everything to do with the case and just quite stressed really, at home I would*

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<sup>7</sup> The **Assessment and Supported Year in Employment** was introduced in 2012 as a recommended by the Social Work Reform Board and has been created in order to help newly qualified social workers to further their knowledge and skills and to enhance their professional confidence.

*think about it consistently, at work all I was focused on was this case and even when I was doing something else, it was in the back of my mind*

Similarly, she was also transparent in the way in which her own emotions could physically affect her:

*On Sunday night, all the anxieties come back, and I have to start planning the week, which really does bother me sometimes because Sunday is quite a quiet day anyway, 6 o'clock on a Sunday and I start thinking about what I haven't done last week again.*

In her second interview she further added that

*I noticed that when I am stressed I pace everywhere. So, I'll be on the phone and I'll walk up and down. In the old office, I used to walk around in a circle and Shirley said it used to drive her nuts. Because A she couldn't hear what I was saying and B because suddenly I'd be up and just walking [...] the other things I do is I get a lot louder when I am angry.*

I often wondered whether her status as a fairly inexperienced professional allowed her more freedom in expressing her own emotional struggles. I will come back to discuss this point further later on. At the same time, during her first interview, what was particularly intriguing about Ann's narrative was the way in which she described her own coping strategies whenever the intensity of her emotions became too excessive and the use she made of her managers and colleagues:

*It's making others aware that this is happening and then it helps me feel a bit better.*

Later she added that:

*I'd say when I do get really stressed, I probably do unload on everybody, so I sort of tell my manager what's going on, probably to the extent she doesn't need to know about and I'll tell my family or my partner and they don't really need to know about it either. So, I will unload, not sort of serious confidential things but just what's going on or if I'm busy, things like that.*

It thus appeared that Ann especially relied on Shirley, her manager, for emotional help and support in a particular way:

*I need to tell my manager what I've got to do, so that I'm not stressing about this having a long-lasting effect on my work or what I'm doing.*

Whenever her anxieties became too excessive Ann usually felt the urge to share what she had been doing with Shirley. In doing this, the intensity of those anxieties significantly decreased. Developing Klein's concept of 'projective identification' (Klein, 1952), Bion (1962) emphasises the communicative component of this powerful psychological mechanism and coined the term 'reverie' in order to describe the mother's ability to acknowledge and accept the child's split-off anxieties and tensions, metabolise, detoxify and then return them to the infant in a more bearable intensity and form. He further argues that this situation is the prototype for the thinking process that constantly develops through life (Glover, 2008). At the beginning of the fieldwork, I realised how Ann heavily relied on Shirley's constant and meaningful presence to effectively modulate the intensity of her own anxieties. When I prompted Ann in describing the nature of her relationship with Shirley she admitted that:

*I would say I lean on her quite a lot, I mean I'd say a lot less than maybe I used to but mainly because [...] she's obviously very aware of everything but I suppose also for the emotional reassurance, [...] when I do have times when I'm coming across something that I don't know about, I will unload onto her and tell her everything, maybe just to get that confidence in myself, [...] but I'll share as much information I can and tell her my plans [...] I think she probably does take a lot of my anxiety off me.*

She then gave a concrete example whereby:

*I remember calling at about 6 o'clock on Friday and it had been at the end of a day of visits but I hadn't seen her all week [...] I'd had a few things crop up, that I thought "I need to tell you because [a] I'll forget and [b] I'm quite worried.*

Shirley appeared to be fully aware of her own role in Ann's ability to cope with the emotional demands of her work. For example, Shirley acknowledged that she had done a good job in supporting Ann when:

*she's had a father die on her [...] when this father died with his two children, it brought back home when she lost her mother, so it was about supporting her all the way through that... I am sure she will mention to you that situation.*

It therefore emerged how not only did Shirley play a pivotal role in supporting Ann's emotional wellbeing, but that she was also aware of her emotional openness. A few weeks later, whilst observing a supervision session, I was intrigued by the following exchange where Shirley was asking Ann whether she had received the confirmation letter from a University where she was about to begin a Post Qualifying course:

*A: I haven't been given anything. They did have a timetable on the application form but I'm not sure if it was confirmed.*

*S: Have you got your appointments letter?*

*A: No, I've given all the information in, in June and received nothing back apart from I've received all the information, so there's nothing come back.*

*S: I thought I had an email saying you received a place.*

*A: No, I didn't see that.*

*S: Let me have a look ... because we've received an email to say you've received a place on the next module [...] Yes. Did you get that one?*

*A: When was that sent?*

*S: 18<sup>th</sup> June.*

*A: Oh okay. That's fair enough.*

*A: Do you want me to email that to you?*

*S: Yeah, do I need to collect a letter or ...?*

*S: Yeah.*

*A: So, I just need to go down there and say, "Can I have my letter?"*



S: *Yeah.*

A: *And then where do I take that?*

S: *You'll get an email with regards to enrolment and then you'll take that for your enrolment day at the university. And that's the modules that you are...*

S: *Yeah, I knew that was the one that they were signing me up for. Yeah, no problem.*

S: *Good thing I keep everything.*

A: *Yeah, I completely missed that, what was I doing on the 18<sup>th</sup>?*

S: *Getting ready to go to Glastonbury?*

A: *oh, yes, maybe, probably stressing about packing.*

At the end of the supervision I remember thinking back to this brief exchange, which I explicitly mentioned in my reflective diary, and feeling rather uncomfortable as I sensed that Shirley's omniscience was somehow deskilling Ann. Shirley's competence and constant presence in Ann's work, although highly strategic in enabling her to better regulate the intensity of her own anxieties, at the same time appeared to not encourage Ann's 'mind to work' (Mitchell, 2006;69). Admittedly, throughout the entire duration of the first supervision, I often found myself struggling to reconcile the idea of Ann I had created in my mind following our first interview and the Ann I was observing interacting with her own manager. During my interview, I had come across a practitioner who, although fairly inexperienced, appeared able to reflect and to freely talk about her own emotional struggles. She also seemed to be genuinely determined in improving her knowledge, skills and experience in order to become an experienced and competent social worker. In chapter 7 I will reflect on the way in which Ann's recent completion of her training might have positively impacted on her ability to honestly and freely talk about her own emotions. However, within the supervisory setting, Ann often struggled to suitably answer Shirley's questions: 'I am not sure' or 'no, I should ask that', 'I don't know who the reviewing officer is' were some of her frequent answers. She often had to check her diary as she could not remember when she had last met a service user for example.

During our second interview, there was a lot of evidence of how Ann still relied heavily on Shirley. For example, whilst talking about a situation whereby one of the users she had been working with had become quite hostile towards her and eventually complained about her to the HCPC<sup>8</sup>:

*Shirley left that in place and sort of made a direction that the only person on the team that could communicate with them was her and that she'd do it in writing.*

Towards the end of the interview she further added that:

*knowing that this was quite a high-profile case I got back to the office and phoned Shirley and said, 'so what do you think?' [...]*

When Shirley went on maternity leave, I occasionally found myself wondering how Ann would cope with her departure as I realised how much she depended on her emotionally and practically. However, what I had not expected was that, just after completing my fourth and final observation of her supervision sessions, I would once more struggle to reconcile two different images: the image of the clumsy and hesitant social worker I had observed at the beginning of my fieldwork with the confident and competent senior practitioner that I had thanked for having taken part in my research. How was that possible? Having been through undeniably adverse external circumstances, some of which I have already discussed in previous chapters (i.e. change in the management, substantial changes within the team with several colleagues leaving and the Ofsted inspection amongst others), how had Ann managed to flourish into a competent, knowledgeable and reliable practitioner?

During our final interview, Ann herself insightfully admitted that:

*Shirley wasn't the first manager I had but she was the manager I had very shortly after I joined the team as a social worker. I had a good relationship with her and I think I had a trust that I could essentially go to her with anything and I don't think it's that I don't trust Amanda, I do, but I think her management style was very different and I think.*

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<sup>8</sup> **Health and Care Professions Council** is the regulatory body for social work at the time of my research.

In the final interview, it appeared that Ann had become aware of the use she had made of Shirley ('I'd probably tell Shirley more than she needed to know') and how much she had relied on her at the beginning of my fieldwork. Shirley's departure unfortunately coincided with a difficult time for the entire team. In addition to this, it is also important to remember that Amanda, who had just taken up her role as team manager, had to take some time off because she broke her ankle. In these circumstances, it is unsurprising that Ann had not been able to utilise either her manager or some of her colleagues as an effective container for her own anxieties (Bion, 1962). Consequently, Ann had to

*take responsibility for managing my own anxieties and making my own decisions and that probably came at a time when I was quite confident to do so.*

Although the structure of the adult state of mind or part of personality 'begins to form very early on [...], it probably does not come fully into its own until it has experienced a bereavement, especially the death of a parent, for this brings home the sense of feeling responsible for the world' (Meltzer and Harris, 2013;86). Segal (1988) describes the process of internalisation, which she explicitly links to Klein's depressive position (see literature review chapter) which is usually associated with the child's ability to recognise the mother as 'independent and liable to go away' (p.69). This important realisation intensifies the child's need 'to possess this object, keep it inside and, if possible, to protect it from his own destructiveness' (p.69). Moreover, it would be fair to argue that, in Ann's situation, the adverse external circumstances (and not only the person's own destructiveness) may as well have played a crucial role in pushing her to internalise that positive and gratifying experience. Amanda, as recognised by Ann, had a rather different managerial style from Shirley.

Amanda herself acknowledged Shirley's strong knowledge of the cases allocated to her team and recognised that she did not 'work in the same way as' her

*No doubt, she's got a memory, like oh my God, I don't know how she remembers everything, [...] I would rather not, but instead be keeping an eye on the status of the visits, the bigger picture kind of thing*

In Kathryn's story, an example was presented whereby Amanda had forgotten a conversation she had had with her regarding a case she had been working with.

However, despite the undeniably difficult external circumstances and the increase in the anxieties and a sense of mistrust within the LA, Ann appeared to increasingly become more competent and confident as a practitioner:

*I think one of the biggest growths, it's a good thing and a bad thing, is that I'm not necessarily scared to be wrong anymore, I think if I tried something because I think that's the evidence, that's the best thing and I think that and it doesn't go that way, I think in some ways I've thought I've put my trust in that family, I've really tried to promote them and to support them, now we'll go this way. I've been getting the more demanding cases [...] then you're ready to become senior so that's... scary but also exciting.*

Ann's growth had not been unnoticed, and she was promoted to senior practitioner. At the same time, I could not avoid thinking about Kathryn's situation, where she had been promised the same promotion long before Ann and who had been told that she could not get it 'until all of your cases are up to date'. Both Kathryn and Ann were dealing with highly complex situations, the kind of situations a senior practitioner would usually be expected to work with. At the same time, Ann herself had admitted that her recording had occasionally been an issue and shared an incident rather like the one Kathryn had mentioned in one of our interviews:

*our system is programmed to be very accurate at recording things, so for instance [...] if you miss it [...] there'll be a report through and our manager will get really anxious [...] and I think: 'I visited them on Thursday, it's Monday and I was in court on Friday, it's not that I haven't visited them, it's that I haven't written them up'. [...] that will get me more stressed than the face to face direct social work". (4<sup>th</sup> interview)*

Towards the end of my fieldwork, it became apparent how Kathryn and Ann were in similar situations: they were the most experienced practitioners within the team and other colleagues often relied on them for guidance and support. I therefore wondered: how is it possible that although being in very similar situation, Ann was promoted whereas Kathryn left her job and obtained a senior position within a different LA?

Interestingly, Kelly, the third participant, during her final interview made a remark which drew my attention towards the relationship between Ann and Amanda. Whilst talking about the changes and the difficult period they had been through, Kelly, although cautious about what she was about to say, mentioned that:

*this is just my view, my opinion, [...] I don't know, but it was like a personality thing, this is my interpretation, but the new management seem to quite like Ann...and that, you know, whether she was doing the same as me or not, they were all right with her. There wasn't the same kind of tone... with me and Kathryn, we struggled more, the way they do it to us seemed different.*

Before proceeding, it is important to point out that all three research participants appeared to be very close to one another. Despite her promotion, Ann maintained a very positive and supportive relationship with Kathryn. For example, during our last interview Ann mentioned how she will:

*miss Kathryn because I always thought Kathryn was quite wise and some of the advice she gave, she could be quite reflective [...] she was a good person to discuss cases with because she could relate to a lot of them and say what she did.*

Therefore, it appeared there was no animosity amongst the three research participants, but instead they had managed to create a supporting and genuine relationship between themselves.

As mentioned earlier, with Kathryn, I could not complete all four observations of supervision as I had originally planned because she left the LA before the end of my fieldwork. Several planned observations had been cancelled at the last minute and, to my annoyance, a few times I had only been made aware that the supervision had either been cancelled or rescheduled after I had arrived at the LA offices. Instead, with Ann, only one observation was rescheduled. In hindsight I could then note how different the emotive tone of the supervisions with Ann had been compared to Kathryn's. With Kathryn, at the end of her supervisions, whilst writing up my observations, I did struggle to remember the sequence of the events. At the same time, during those supervision sessions, I often felt quite sleepy. There was a soporific atmosphere which affected my

concentration and ability to think. Within the supervisory setting, the relationship between Kathryn and Amanda was particularly strained. The two supervisions I observed between Kathryn and Amanda, although long (more than two hours) mainly focussed on recording decisions Kathryn had already made on her cases. The tone of the conversation was highly formal and impersonal. There was a palpable discomfort when Amanda, at the beginning of my final observation, asked Kathryn 'so, how are you?' followed with an undeniable accusatory tone in Amanda's voice when reminding Kathryn that some of her case notes were not up-to-date.

If Amanda maintained strictly formal manners during Kathryn's supervision, with Ann, her attitude was completely different. She was more at ease, often made small jokes and appeared less 'defended' (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). Even towards me, at the beginning of my final observation, she was very cheerful, and made some jokingly personal remarks about how the day before she had: "nearly fell down yesterday whilst walking my dog... thank goodness I didn't". She later stated that she would not use a laptop anymore during supervisions because 'it just takes so much time, I'd rather concentrate on the supervision than anything else'. They then immediately started talking about one of the situations Ann had been working with, but then Amanda, suddenly and unexpectedly, changed the subject of the conversation:

*Am it's still early days we need to see how it develops. I feel that now it's a bit noisier within the team, and it's much busier I don't know whether you've picked that up*

*An yes, I feel much busier, but I think the atmosphere is quite good, we are coping quite well. Nobody is jumping up and down ... [...]*

*Am yeah... I feel like now [the team] is really settled ... and now it's going to feel unsettled again [laugh] that's change, isn't it?*

*An yeah...*

*Am ... we have another worker starting next week, [...] he has got mainly experience with children with disability, but he has worked in safeguarding*

*and child protection, he came across, the way he spoke, he seemed very competent.*

As transpires from this conversation, Amanda was openly sharing with Ann some of the imminent changes that were going to take place within the team, in doing this, she was actively trying to create a closer working alliance with Ann by demarcating a subtle but evident line between 'us', who have managed to recreate, despite the inevitable difficulties, a 'good atmosphere' within the team and the 'others' who are 'just miserable' and 'just cast that across all the team'. In Ann's situation, the close and supportive working alliance she and Amanda had managed to build up had undoubtedly given her a strong sense of security, which deeply and positively affected her own work.

It is undeniable that neither Kelly nor Kathryn had been able to form a similar close working alliance with Amanda. Unfortunately, a greater discussion of the underlying reasons that may have made it difficult for them to create a close, supportive relationship with Amanda lies outside the scope of this current chapter. Instead, what is relevant to consider, is that Ann, now a senior practitioner and one of the most experienced members of the entire team, appeared to be less willing to talk about the emotional struggles she experienced during her daily work (Hollway and Jefferson, 2012). Whereas at the beginning Ann appeared to be open and willing to talk about her own emotional struggles, during our final interview there was an underlying attempt from her to minimise some of the way in which her work had been affecting her emotionally. For example, whilst talking about her weekends, she acknowledged that:

*That hasn't necessarily changed but I don't know if that's necessarily just a me being prepared [...] I don't have trouble sleeping or anything but I will go to bed thinking about the week, yes (4<sup>th</sup> Interview)*

It is important to emphasise that Ann has never tried to deny her initial emotional struggles, however, in her final interview her attempt to distance herself from those accounts was palpable.

### *6.2.1 Key learning points from Ann's story*

Ann's situation highlights how team dynamics could foster the personal and professional development of its members. Her promotion to senior practitioner, which took place just before the end of the fieldwork, certainly appeared to be deserved and could be seen as a formal recognition of her professional growth and the development that had taken place. Ann, alone amongst all the other research participants, had benefitted from closer and ongoing emotional and professional support from Amanda. Not only did she receive regular supervision, but more importantly, during those supervision sessions Amanda appeared able to provide a suitable emotional containment by maintaining a positive, constructive and meaningful mental presence (Ruch, 2007).

At the same time, however, it is equally important to emphasise the important and crucial role played by Shirley. Shirley initially acknowledged and accepted Ann's undigested and unprocessed emotional experiences and returned them to her in a more manageable intensity. These positive and nurturing experiences had most likely instilled in Ann the belief that negative and intense emotions can be managed, thought about, and effectively dealt with. Once Shirley went on maternity leave, the strong working alliance she had created with Amanda may have reinforced in her the belief that emotions can be effectively understood, contained, and managed. In this situation, it appears that Ann was still able to benefit from a supportive and meaningful 'organisational containment' (Ruch, 2007) probably due to the fact that she was still a relatively inexperienced practitioner. At the same time, in this situation, Amanda probably had never fully considered how much nurturing and emotional support Ann sought and gained from other sources (i.e. Kathryn, Kelly and Jean amongst others).



### 6.3 The 'difficult' participant: Giorgia's story.

Giorgia was amongst the Italian participants who volunteered to take part in my research. Arranging our first interview had not been a difficult task and we easily agreed a suitable time for both of us to meet. During our first encounter, I was impressed by Giorgia's willingness to share her own story with me and to talk about some of the emotional struggles she experienced in her daily work. However, whilst re-reading the transcript of that first meeting, I came to realise that two different somehow opposing narratives seemed to coexist in her account. She was adamant about presenting an image of 'Giorgia' the high achieving student, who managed to complete her academic work well before all the other students in her cohort, and because of that, the University had had to organise a qualifying assessment board just for her:

*Honestly, I completed my studies six months before everyone else.*

This was the 'Giorgia' who had been competently dealing with highly complex situations and praised by senior management for the high standard of her assessments.

At the same time, a different and contradictory narrative seemed to emerge from her interview as well. Alongside this façade of a highly competent professional, there was the 'Giorgia' who struggled, at the beginning of her training, in talking about her own emotions and feelings:

*Finding myself in a place where people asked me how I felt emotionally, gosh, that was quite shocking for me.*

She also mentioned how, throughout her training, she felt:

*Different from all the other students. [...] My motivation to become a social worker was different from theirs.*

Giorgia implicitly hinted that her motivation behind her decision to train as a social worker was the result of a more mature and thought out reflection compared to all her fellow students.

What I never expected, however, was the intensity of my own emotional reactions when I listened back to the audio-tape of our interview. Whilst hearing Giorgia's recorded

voice, I felt an overwhelmingly powerful sense of rage taking over my mind. Despite having read widely about the importance of the researcher's emotional responses as an additional source of important data, I was still shocked to be exposed to such intense emotions. I admit that I stopped listening to the tape. In hindsight, I often wondered whether I did my best to distance myself from such powerful negative emotions. Towards the end of this section I will discuss further the potential reasons behind such strong counter-transferential responses.

A few days later, when I was less absorbed in anger, I decided to listen to Giorgia's interview again. The second time, I noticed other aspects in her account which I had not fully realised earlier. For example, she stated that once she had first joined the LA she was holding 'six hundred cases on my own, this was difficult [...]' and that her colleagues who had a significant lower number of cases were not willing to help her. I will return on this particular aspect in the next chapter.

Furthermore, I found myself being particularly annoyed by the way in which Giorgia was portraying her colleagues and team manager. Giorgia's struggle to be an effective team member was a recurrent theme, if not the main theme, throughout all four interviews. In this interview, her desire to share her own opinion regarding her colleagues was palpable. For example, earlier in the interview she suddenly began complaining that the feedback she received from the rest of the team was never related to her competence at work, but instead had been that she never joined the colleagues for lunch

*I choose who I have lunch with, you know what I mean? If I am tired and I want to stay on my own [...] perhaps I had five difficult meetings and I don't want to sit and listen to other people.*

In the same interview, Giorgia openly complained about her team manager, Marta, whom she found particularly unhelpful and unsupportive:

*Well, a team without a head is a big problem [...] if you find someone in front of you who doesn't have that many years of experience, she finds herself in a complex personal emotional situation, she will deal with minor stuff but not the important ones.*

She also firmly stated that she had never felt that Marta had ever supported her emotionally:

*I don't get anything from my meeting with her, I don't need her to say that I am good, that's not the point, what I need is to also hear that I have made a mistake sometimes, because I need to hear that because perhaps I didn't really understand a situation. I don't get offended, the opposite.*

Gradually I began to realise that one of the aspects I found particularly difficult to bear in Giorgia's accounts was that her comments about Marta went well beyond the professional sphere. They purposively and powerfully targeted the manager on a personal level. Giuliana and Francesca, the other two participants, had also occasionally raised some criticisms towards Marta as well, however, their remarks had always been contextualised to the professional sphere. Neither of them had ever made any comments about Marta's personal circumstances. Only Giorgia did.

Unfortunately, to my surprise, Giorgia presented additional challenges. In subsequent encounters with her, in a few instances, she also succeeded in making me doubt myself and what I had observed. This was never the case with any of the other research participants. As mentioned above, during the first interview Giorgia had been highly critical of Marta, the team manager. During my second observation of the team meeting, I was thus pleased to notice how, whilst the team was discussing how to best deal with a difficult situation, in a couple of instances Marta gently and calmly invited Giorgia to share her opinion with the rest of the team. In contrast, the service manager abruptly stopped Giorgia a few times whilst she was talking. She then spent most of her time signing off and reading some paperwork rather than paying attention to what was being discussed. However, a few hours later, during our second interview, Giorgia stated:

*Now we have a service manager, who is supra partes<sup>9</sup>, this works better [...] she leaves more space to people to contribute to the discussion, she is more welcoming.*

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<sup>9</sup> Above everyone

I can still vividly remember my confusion in hearing Giorgia's words, which completely differed from my recollection of what had taken place just a few hours before. Unfortunately, since our interview took place just after the team meeting, I had not yet had the possibility to write up the full account of my observation. For the first time I felt the strong urge to find someone who would either confirm or disprove my recollections. Furthermore, during the same interview, Giorgia shared another anecdote that left me both confused and concerned regarding not only what she had said, but also the tone in which it was delivered. Whilst talking about an incident that had taken place a few weeks before where Giorgia had been to Court for one of her cases:

*It was a particularly heavy experience... I didn't like it at all. I received very nice emails from the colleagues who had been there and also from the consultant appointed by the Court. [...] during the meeting I was so nervous I couldn't even read out my report. I was shaking too much... Then the psychologist, who was right next to me, said 'let me read your report aloud, you've left at home your glasses'. She had understood that I was struggling because the family solicitor had started to accuse me, to attack me quite heavily.*

Giorgia spoke about this incident without any emotional tone, merely reported it as if it had happened to someone else. Only much later, whilst re-reading and re-listening to the interview did I begin to wonder if my own emotional experience, my perceptions and my (in)ability to think could be somehow connected and directly linked with her own emotional experience. I therefore began wondering whether Giorgia was somehow making me experience what she was experiencing in her professional life at that time, which could be seen as evidence of powerful defence mechanisms she utilised to evade mental pain.

I will now discuss three additional examples which will, hopefully, shed further light on the way Giorgia had used our interviews.

The first incident took place during our second interview. As explained earlier, we had planned to meet on the same day of the team meeting. Unfortunately, at the end of the team meeting I felt unwell as I had a strong headache. I spoke to Giorgia to let her know that I was briefly going to buy some painkillers but reassured her that I would return in

time for our interview. In the meantime, the rest of the team (except Giorgia), who were about to go out for lunch, invited me to join them. I decided that I would go with them just to buy some food as I had to return straight away to the LA offices for my interview with Giorgia. No more than twenty minutes later, and five minutes before the original time we were meant to meet, I returned to the LA building and rang the doorbell. Unfortunately, nobody responded. After five minutes I tried to call Giorgia's phone, but she did not answer. Twenty minutes later, I eventually managed to speak with some of Giorgia's colleagues whose offices were on the floor below hers who kindly let me in. When I arrived at her office, I found her quietly sat at her desk reading a book. When she saw me, she smiled and said 'oh, you're here. Come in'. I apologised to her for being late, although I did mention that I had been waiting outside for quite a long time as no-one answered my calls. Giorgia just smiled and candidly replied: 'oh really? Well, now you're here'. Unfortunately, only fifteen minutes into our interview one of her colleagues knocked at the door warning Giorgia that there was a couple outside waiting for their appointment with her:

*Yes, at 2,30... anyway the husband talks to everyone.... And I don't really want to meet them actually!*

Since I felt highly uncomfortable in continuing the interview knowing that there were people waiting outside the office, I stopped the interview and said to Giorgia that we could continue next time when we met for our interview. Steiner (1995) argues that an interpretation that 'aims at understanding meanings and not explaining causes' (p.441) could lead to a reductive and potentially mechanistic operation. Steiner's claim was therefore particularly useful in helping me to further explore the possibility of whether Giorgia's behaviour could have been understood because of something that had happened either during the team meeting or immediately afterwards. I then remembered that Giorgia, during our first interview, had mentioned she had found it particularly annoying when the rest of the team criticised her for not spending the lunch break with them. On the day of our interview, I left with the rest of the team who were going out for lunch, whilst Giorgia had remained behind alone. As described in greater detail within the literature review chapter, Klein (Segal, 1988) has described the

schizoid-paranoid state of mind whereby retaliatory attitudes can easily take place in a situation that can easily be summarised in the following sentence:

*Those who are not with me are against me (Meltzer and Harris, 2013;101).*

I therefore wondered whether Giorgia's attitude and behaviour during our second meeting could be explained as a retaliatory, aggressive response following my decision to briefly join the rest of the team for their lunch break. After all, Giorgia had made it clear, in our first interview, that she never approved of these get together lunches.

The second example took place during our third meeting. Even during this interview, Giorgia spent nearly the entire time criticising Marta's work and appeared adamant in emphasising how Sara, who was now covering for Marta's maternity leave, was instead very supportive and helpful.

*Sara has only worked with adults and therefore there are lot of things she doesn't know yet, and often she sends you some notes asking for the reasons why I wrote something, because there are some procedures that she does not yet know, but that's fine.*

Giorgia had previously criticised Giuliana for not being sufficiently experienced and knowledgeable. Therefore, I was rather confused that during that interview, all the qualities Sara seemed to possess appeared to be the very same ones that she had criticised in Giuliana. Furthermore, and once again contradictorily, Giorgia shared that Sara was unfamiliar with the child protection procedures and policies and often asked her and other colleagues for some clarifications. I could clearly remember how Giorgia had often complained that Marta had lacked sufficient experience and was at the same contractual level as all of them. Based on Giorgia's account, and later confirmed by both Giuliana and Francesca, Sara too was at the same contractual level as all the other front-line practitioners. This was another aspect, in Giorgia's narratives, which I originally felt unable to make sense of.

The third and final example took place during our final interview. When I arrived at the LA offices at the agreed time, I was warmly welcomed by Giorgia. Giorgia then immediately began talking about her work. What then followed was a situation where I

felt overwhelmed with an avalanche of emotions. I later realised that I had barely asked any questions, but instead I had been reduced to be a mere audience in her 'final performance'.

During this interview, Giorgia mainly spoke about a family she had been working with, whom she described as being '*crazy, completely crazy*', but then insisted that her colleagues never fully understood that the only way she could work with them was to do the following

*You have to enter into their crazy world, in their delusion, then you can make some small adjustments.*

She then explained how she:

*was unlucky because the service manager was here when I met them a few weeks ago and she was very concerned [...] father is quite aggressive, he doesn't follow rules, you need to treat him like a child [...] because you have to become part of their delirium. Then if the LA becomes too rigid... you undo all the work I have done so far.*

She further shared that one day the mother had turned up to the LA offices being verbally abusive towards one of her colleagues and she had twice threatened to '*throw me out of the window*'. Despite these aggressive and concerning outbursts and the management suggestions that she should report them to the police, Giorgia kept insisting that her colleagues advice '*was inappropriate*'. The rest of the interview continued with Giorgia providing several anecdotes whereby she wanted to show me how you should deal with '*this crazy family*'.

When going through the transcript of our final interview, I was struck by a remark made by Giorgia which enabled me to better contextualise some of my encounters with her. I wondered whether Giorgia's unilateral decision to lengthily describe the way in which she had dealt with this family ('*family made up of crazy people*') and their own struggles to deal with anxieties and uncertainties ('*If they're calm they're fine, no problems, but if they're anxious, they can't respect rules anymore*') could have been her own attempt to

improve my understanding of her. This idea was reinforced when Giorgia, whilst talking about this family's anger, stated that:

*Even the anger, when it's there is not an anger intended to harm, but it's an anger that is meant to shake you because it means that I hadn't listen to them properly, I wasn't there for them. But it was an anger similar to the one a son might have with a brother, with a dear relative, or a mother who tells her son off... the intension was never to break our relationship, that's for sure.*

It was not until the end of this complex relationship, that it appeared that somehow Giorgia had succeeded in offering some guidance that helped me to make sense of her own narrative by subtly asking to be properly listened to.

Right at the end of my interviews with her, Giorgia offered me a way to better understand my own counter-transferential responses. By explicitly acknowledging that anger, as emotion, 'is meant to shake you' but 'never to break our relationship', I came to realise that Giorgia probably wanted me to experience, on a more profound level, how angry herself she felt in her work. She gave me a privileged insight into her 'world'. Something which was probably too difficult for her to verbally express during our interviews. In hindsight I often wondered whether my own anger, confusion and sense of being powerless may have been her attempt to make me fully appreciate how difficult was for her to be trapped in a role assigned to her by the team. I will return on this particular point in the next chapter.

### *6.3.1 Key learning points from Giorgia's story*

In this final section, I intend to reflect on the potentially negative and destructive aspects that unrecognised, undigested emotions might have on the relationships social workers develop as part of their job. In this respect, the work of Bollas (1987) has been particularly useful, in offering a captivating theoretical framework that can shed further light on the nature of those dynamics.

Through his clinical work Bollas (1989) became interested in the way in which some patients 'lodge[s] them[him]selves inside the other' (p.3) and therefore may cast the



‘shadow’ of this object, ‘of what is known but not yet thought’ (p.4), on someone else without real consciousness or awareness. In this situation, within a relationship, one person compels the other to experience his or her inner world.

Bollas (1989) is a clinician who positions himself within the British Independent Group psychoanalytical movement. His presentation of the ‘unthought known’, however, closely reminds us of another psychological phenomenon I briefly described whilst presenting Ann’s story: projective identification (Klein, 1942). I will return to the Kleinian concept of projective identification and its relevance in better understanding Giorgia’s story in chapter 7. With this in mind, it is nonetheless undeniable to me that all the various research participants, both in Italy and England, have, at some points, compelled me to experience some of their ‘unthought known’s. For example, in previous chapters, I spoke of the way in which, within the English context, my own emotional experiences during the Ofsted inspection and throughout the entire fieldwork appeared to mirror those of the research participants. Similarly, with Kathryn, I could easily find a connection between the sense of frustration I often experienced due to the numerous times when I would arrive at the LA offices at the agreed time and could not find her and her own annoyance towards her manager for all the times her supervision had been cancelled at short notice. Within the Italian context, not only Giorgia, but also the other participants have occasionally provoked in me some emotional responses which were directly linked to their own emotional experiences as a child protection social worker. While several examples are available, an incident with Francesca is the most apt. I had arranged to meet her in the morning for our second interview but, when I arrived at her office, she stated that she could not meet me because she had a dentist appointment and asked me whether we could meet in the afternoon instead. I agreed to this change as I was keen to complete the second round of interviews during the week I was in Italy. This unexpected change meant that I had a few free hours, which I was not happy about. In particular, I felt that that her attitude had somehow devalued my role and the efforts I was making to gather the data. To my surprise, just a few minutes into our interview, Francesca shared:

*Well one of those situations where you are confronted with strong defences which devalue your work, they don't consider your preparation especially if you find someone prepared in front of view, you know what I mean?*

I clearly remember thinking 'well that's how you just made me feel'.

With Giorgia these counter-transferential responses were much more intense. It is important to consider that with participants in both Italy and England, I had the possibility of creating an ongoing dialogue and using part of the interviews to share some of my thoughts and feelings. This difficulty in sharing my reflections with Giorgia impacted on the nature and intensity of some of my emotional reactions. In the next chapter, I am going to explore the role team dynamics might have played in heightening my emotional responses to the fieldwork with Giorgia.

There is a wealth of papers and studies which consider the way in which front-line practitioners might become the receptacle of projections of the people they work with (Salzberg-Wittenberg, 1970; Cellentani, 1995; Bower, 2005 amongst others). All these studies emphasise the importance for social workers and professionals to be able to acknowledge, recognise, and appropriately deal with these projections. The common assumption underlying all these studies is the postulation that, as Bollas (1987) describes, the 'shadow' of emotions: thoughts and feelings that are not fully acknowledged and contained will be either projected onto someone else or acted out. However, if we accept this hypothesis, we should also be willing to consider that the reverse situation could potentially take place. Giorgia's story, the intensity of her projections, and my sense of surprise and self-doubt compelled me to reflect on the inevitable impact unthought, undigested and unrecognised emotions might have on the nature of the relationships professionals develop in their daily work.

Within the literature review chapter, Klein's (Segal, 1989; Waddell, 2003) important contribution to the understanding of the impact that our constant fluctuations between different positions, or states of mind, might have on the nature of the relationships we develop with other people was highlighted. In the paranoid-schizoid position, relationships, events and people are experienced either extremely positively or negatively. In Giorgia this polarised attitude was particularly evident in the way she

spoke about Marta and Sara, her two team managers. More importantly, in the paranoid-schizoid state of mind differences are not tolerated. They are instead considered serious threats towards one's own survival which in turn can prompt aggressive, hostile responses aimed to hurt and annihilate the other person. This could then explain Giorgia's negative and derogatory comments she had made towards Marta as a person. It is within the paranoid-schizoid position that projections, acting outs and retaliatory attitudes are more likely to take place. I will return on this important point in chapter 7.

## **7 Chapter: Emotions and the working environment: two uneasy bedfellows**

The emotional experiences of all research participants, both in Italy and England, have provided convincing evidence of the importance emotions occupy in child protection social work practice, confirming some of the key messages found within the existing literature (see chapter 2). Building upon the findings of the literature review and taking into consideration the data collected for this thesis, the discussion will develop alongside three main trajectories. Firstly, I will reflect on the potential impact unrecognised individual and organisational projective processes may have on front-line practitioners negatively impacting on their ability to practice safely and competently. Secondly, I will argue how an unresponsive, or overly obsessional/punitive, environment might lead professionals to experience a detrimental 'double deprivation' as described by Henry (1974). Finally, the discussion will consider the importance for practitioners of being emotionally resilient. I will highlight the relevance, from a practitioners perspective, of being able to rely on robust internal emotional resources which can support them in modulating the intensity of their emotional responses to their work to a level that can enhance their ability to 'learn from experience' (Bion, 1962), increasing their ability to positively adapt to the external demands of their work. I will also highlight how an emotionally responsive and safe environment could, potentially, even enhance their ability to practice safely and competently. Consequently, I will then argue the importance of conceptualise and understand social workers' ability to deal with the emotional demands of their work as a dynamic feature, stemming from the interaction between their individual emotional resilience and the working environment in which they operate. I would suggest calling this feature 'professional resilience'. Finally, based on the messages from published literature and the data gathered as part of this thesis, I will then consider some practice implications.

7.1 *The working environment: the negative impact projective processes might have on front-line practitioners.*

Projective processes are believed to be both inevitable and ubiquitous within every working environment from a psychodynamic perspective. As discussed in chapter 2, since the publication of Menzies-Lyth's (1960) seminal paper, there has been a growing awareness of the role played by unconscious processes within the working environment (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994; Hinshelwood and Skogstad, 2000; Armstrong, 2005; Stapley, 2006; Armstrong and Rustin, 2015). Whilst discussing Giorgia's story, I explained how the work of Bollas (1987) and the psychoanalytic concept of projective identification (Klein, 1952) were particularly instrumental in making sense of some of my own emotional reactions to the fieldwork. Within this section I intend to actively consider the way in which organisational dynamics might enable us to obtain an even deeper understanding of her story.

Obholzer and Roberts (2009) have described the way in which organisations can create what they call the 'troublesome' worker. What I found particularly enlightening about their ideas was the notion that individual practitioners might, in some instances, identify with organisational defences and therefore find themselves acting out, unconsciously, a role that has been assigned to them by the organisation itself by 'taking up a particular role based on others' projections and becoming identified with the projected role' (p.136). Initially, they drew attention to individual professionals' potential 'susceptibility or valency to being drawn into certain unconscious tasks on behalf of the institution-as-a-whole' (p.134).

As discussed in chapter 6, Giorgia's individual history may have made her more predisposed to be the receptacle of some organisational defences more than her other colleagues. For example, when studying for her social work degree, Giorgia reported that she had found it difficult to relate to other fellow students, whom she felt were less mature than her. When she then started working, allegedly, she was the only practitioner who had 'six hundred cases' and her own colleagues had not been forthcoming in helping her. Certainly, I always found it difficult that Giorgia could be responsible for such a huge number of cases. I instead considered this strong

statement as her further attempt to emphasise how different she felt from her colleagues. Furthermore, during our first interview, Giorgia, spoke at length how she never liked joining in when, occasionally, the entire team went out for lunch together.

It was therefore possible to observe a situation similar to the ones described by Obholzer and Roberts (2009) whereby organisations, when dealing with difficult, multi-layered and anxiety-provoking situations often find it easier to 'locate their vulnerability in one member 'it's [s]he, not we, who is breaking down' (Obholzer and Roberts, 2009;130). More importantly, Giorgia unconsciously identified herself with these projections and embodied them in the eyes of the other team members. This was particularly evident during my observations of team meeting discussions.

The understanding that came from a more in-depth analysis and reflection of Giorgia's story was instrumental in making me revisit some of the initial struggles I experienced within the English fieldwork. During those initial stages, I often questioned whether some of the research participants might have perceived my presence to be as intimidating as the impending Ofsted inspection. I clearly remember, whilst discussing some of my preliminary findings at a workshop at the University, openly admitting that 'I sometimes feel as if I am one of the Ofsted inspectors'. What I had failed to fully appreciate at that time, though, was the fact that I had indeed partially identified with the role of the Ofsted inspector. In chapter 5, I explained how I had initially feared that I would not be able to get sufficiently rich data from my interviews and observations, that their interviews 'weren't good enough'. I later wondered whether this unconscious identification somehow led me to embody a highly judgmental figure towards the research participants in a similar way that they had perceived the results of the imminent Ofsted inspection would be and, somehow, also the LA senior management's attitude towards front-line practitioners (see Chapter 5).

Admittedly, it took lot of courage (and help) to acknowledge that, in wanting to utilise a more top-down approach, I was somehow 'imposing' a structure, an evaluative framework on the participants' stories to avoid the undermining feeling of 'not knowing' (Bion, 1962). Rather than openly listen to their stories, I wanted to control both my own anxieties and their narratives. I had initially adopted a framework that aimed 'towards

controlling the world' (Meltzer and Harris,2013;36) rather than understanding it. Slowly, it became clearer that my attitude towards the fieldwork may have mirrored the top-down Ofsted approach to social services inspections.

Unaware of the fact that we may have been caught up in a process of projective identifications (Klein, 1952), Giorgia and I were mainly focussed on our own needs, in our frantic attempt to soothe our own anxieties, and thus unable to take into consideration other people's feelings and circumstances. Instead we tried to control other people's thoughts, feelings and behaviours. During my last interview with Giorgia, I struggled to ask her any questions, but could only sit, immobilised, listening to her. She did not even give me time to switch on the recorder. Similarly, at the beginning of the fieldwork within the English context, I found myself unable to fully appreciate the depth and complexity of the participants' stories as I was listening to them through the lenses of a predetermined framework. A situation which somehow mirrored their relationship with the LA's senior management ('they do not listen to us' said Kelly during our third interview. The potential implications that a similar lack or recognition of the potential influence unacknowledged interpersonal and organisational dynamics might have on social workers' daily work can be highly detrimental. Not only will it affect the nature of the relationships they develop as part of their work, but also negatively impact on their ability to safeguard vulnerable children and their families.

## 7.2 Emotions and organisational defences: the risks of a 'double deprivation'.

Bion (1961), Menzies-Lyth (1960) and others (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994; Cooper, 2004; Armstrong and Rustin, 2015) have demonstrated how the main purposes of organisational defences is to create strategies and/or mechanisms with the main purpose of offering their members the opportunity to evade intense and overwhelming anxieties. Organisational defences thus provide opportunities to quickly address complex problems and issues, although it affects the members ability to think and, more importantly, to create an environment whereby individual differences are well tolerated. Halton (2014) argues that organisational defences encourage the 'rigid compliance with

instructions' rather than supporting 'professionals' own discretionary judgement and personal initiative' (p.33).

As previously argued, Giorgia was considered the 'problematic worker', which was instrumental in offering her entire team an escape to acknowledge and deal with contradicting and conflicting team and organisational dynamics. A situation that closely reminds us of the paranoid-schizoid situation described by Klein (Segal, 1988) whereby the rest of the team could identify themselves with the positives and nurturing aspects of their organisational goals as long as Giorgia embodied all the negatives ones.

Similarly, Kathryn's story exemplifies how emotionally resilient practitioners, who might struggle in passively complying with rigid procedural processes might as well become the receptacles of those strong and powerful institutional defences and thus be equally considered 'uncooperative' or 'difficult'. In the previous chapter, I described how, following the publication of the negative Ofsted report, the attitude of senior management towards Kathryn had become more controlling, punitive and rigid. This was particularly striking in the third supervision I observed between Kathryn and Amanda, where the latter was particularly unhappy about the fact that Kathryn's case files were not up to date. After the Ofsted inspection, senior management within the LA unilaterally decided to undertake a restructuring of its children's services. As described in both chapters 5 and 6, Kathryn was the only professional who openly questioned senior management's decision and maintained a more cautious position towards the imminent changes ('don't think this decision will solve all our problems'). It would therefore be fair to argue that Kathryn's ability to better tolerate the complexity and contradictions of the working environment, and to maintain a more balanced approach to the external reality was now negatively perceived by senior management.

Although it is inevitable that organisations would always exercise some degree of control over their employees, if the level of this control and/or the nature of the organisational defences in which professionals operate is not measured, it can make it difficult for them to constructively modulate these emotions. If this situation occurs, as it clearly happened in both Kathryn's and Giorgia's situations, professionals can be left feeling doubly deprived from an emotional point of view (Henry, 1974). The first



deprivation is by the nature of their undeniably challenging work. The second deprivation is then imposed on them by the unresponsive working environment over which they have minimal control, leaving them alone in dealing with the emotional demands of their work. When this situation takes place, as discussed in greater detail in the next section, contrary to public perception, the first practitioners who might potentially leave the profession could be the most resilient ones.

### *7.3    The importance for practitioners to feel contained and protected: from Emotional Resilience to Professional Resilience*

In this final section I would firstly like to address the importance for practitioners of being emotionally resilient and how this can enhance their ability to constructively adapt to the external demands of their work. At the same time, however, I will also argue that resilient practitioners due to their ability to maintain a more balanced attitude towards the competing demands of their work, contrary to public perception, might be the first one to leave the profession if the working environment becomes too controlling, rigid and punitive. Secondly, by considering the ‘emotional resilience’ as a never-ending process, I will emphasise the importance, for practitioners, of being able to rely on an emotionally responsive and safe environment. I will demonstrate how this situation can enhance even further social workers’ ability to satisfactorily cope with the emotional demands of their work. Finally, based on the main points discussed in this chapter, I will highlight the importance to conceptualise practitioners’ ability to satisfactorily deal with the emotional demands of their work as a dynamic construct, stemming from the interaction between their personal emotional resilience and the professional context in which they operate. I then suggest naming this new theoretical concept ‘professional resilience’.

#### *7.3.1    The importance, for practitioners, of being emotionally resilient*

The stories of all the research participants, in both countries, offer additional evidence of how emotionally resilient practitioners are not only able to recognise and understand the

way in which their own emotions affect their work and their decision-making processes but are also more capable of maintaining a positive and constructive attitude even in adverse and difficult circumstances (Morrison, 2007; Ingram, 2012).

From a psychodynamic point of view, Vellacott (2007) considers resilience not just

*a matter of absolute strength. Like a tree that bends in the wind but does not crack, it involves the ability to return to shape: to suffer but not to shatter, nor to become so stuck in a defensive position that there is an impoverishment of personality. Indeed, the struggle involved in hardship may lead to growth, something created out of hardship (p.164).*

Social workers should therefore possess a personal predisposition to be able to modulate the intensity of their emotional experiences to a level that is tolerable for them. That, in turn, can reinforce both their internal resources and consequently their ability to suitably adjust to the demands of the external world.

In the previous chapter, I discussed in detail how, for Kathryn, her need to 'be[ing] a bit detached' in her work, and her natural ability to modulate the intensity of her emotional responses had fostered the learning from experience process (Bion, 1962) and, consequently, promoted her personal, professional and emotional growth. All her colleagues regarded her as a competent, down to earth and knowledgeable practitioner (see Ann's story as well). Kathryn's emotional resilience therefore appeared to rely on strong personal internal resources, which in turn urged her to do 'the best I can' even in difficult and complex situations. As discussed earlier, she had a natural ability to successfully consider each situation from the standpoint of the people she worked with. The other research practitioners have occasionally described her as being a generous colleague: often willing to stay late at work to help and support them if needed. For example, during our first interview, Ann spoke fondly of Kathryn's support and presence during an emergency home visit which lasted till very late.

Kathryn's story thus provide convincing evidence of how being an emotionally resilient practitioner can positively impact on all aspects of social work practice, thoroughly endorsing some of the key messages found within the literature review (Morrison, 2007; Ingram, 2012; Kinman and Grant, 2013; Ingram, 2015).

More importantly, what strongly transpires from her story is the recognition that when practitioners can rely on strong internal emotional resources, they appear to be more capable of maintaining a more balanced approach towards external reality. In the previous chapter I described Kathryn's struggles to reconcile the way in which, following the change in the team manager and the Ofsted inspection, she was treated within the team and the positive feedback on her practice she received from professionals outside the LA ('it's been like being in a parallel universe'). Despite these struggles, she nonetheless succeeded in not overly identifying with some of the negative criticisms and comments she received from senior management, but instead demonstrated a good ability to maintain a positive, more accurate view of her work. Although she conceded that 'some of the stuff I've done haven't necessarily been good', she was still able to acknowledge that she had 'done the best I could considering the situation'. It could therefore be argued that Kathryn's internal emotional resources supported her in maintaining a more 'depressive' state of mind (Segal, 1988) and thus allowed her, differently from Giorgia, to consider the complexities and contradiction of her working environment without necessarily identifying herself with one aspect of the situation. At the same time, when she eventually realised that her working environment was no longer supportive and valued her ('it's not a shared responsibility anymore'), these very same internal resources prompted her to seek alternative employment. During our final interview, she admitted that the changes that had taken place within the LA had made it more difficult for her to get gratification from her work. She also acknowledged that those changes had negatively affected her, and she was thus concerned about the repercussion it might have on her work with vulnerable children and their families.

Kathryn's emotional resilience did indeed play a crucial part in her decision to seek alternative employment. During our third interview, she openly admitted that she begun looking for new job opportunities when she realised that her work was not 'a shared responsibility anymore' and that it was no longer safe for her to 'disagree'. Kathryn eventually made the difficult decision to leave her job within the LA rather than compromising the quality of her work. In this she seems to have been supported by a high sense of purpose based on the strength of her internal emotional resilience. Certainly, Kathryn's decision to leave her job was not an easy one. Kathryn

acknowledged that she would miss some of her colleagues ('I'll miss them a lot') but still decided that 'it is for the best'. This situation is consistent with some of the original findings in Menzies-Lyth's (1960) seminal study, in which she acknowledged that, as a result of the organisational obsessive control and high level of punitive sanctions, a substantial number of good nurses left the hospital.

### *7.3.2 Emotional Resilience: a life-long process of development. The importance of an emotionally responsive and safe environment.*

I would like to discuss now a second important point. From a psychodynamic perspective, there cannot be 'development without pain' (Meltzer and Harris, 2013;57). Mitchell (2006) directly drawing on the work of Winnicott (1958) similarly highlights the potential, from a developmental point of view, of what she calls 'minor traumas', or 'trauma that can be viewed as part of development' (Mitchell, 2006;158) as they 'force the mind to work' (p.69). Minor traumas can therefore increase an individual's ability to effectively adapt to the external world and to allow them the internalisation of positive experiences that can strengthen their personalities.

These arguments invite us to consider the importance of the working environment being able to effectively support practitioners in modulating the intensity of their emotional responses to a level that can foster their personal, professional and emotional growth: 'to suffer but not to shatter' as Vellacott (2007) summarises. Braescu (2012) has indeed raised a similar argument by claiming that, for social workers, experiencing 'mild fear' can increase their ability to bear in mind specific 'dangers that need to be considered in order to protect children from significant harm' (p.10).

By looking closely at the stories of all the research participants, there was a shared agreement that they valued, within the supervisory setting, the opportunity to acknowledge, think and reflect on their own emotions. It therefore appears that the published literature mainly conceptualises the supervisory setting as a 'psychological field' (Lewin, 1951) which can promote practitioners' ability to modulate the intensity of their emotional responses in a way that would allow them to identify good strategies to effectively cope with the demands of the external world (Goddard and Hunt, 2011;

Rogowski, 2011; Munro, 2012; Ruch, 2016; Turney and Ruch, 2018). This is consistent with Ruch's (2007) idea of 'holistic containment' where she emphasises the importance of the existence of 'right conditions' for the professionals' growth and development, which is the result of the influence of 'inter-dependent individual, internal and collective, external influences' (p.677). Similarly, Foster (2009) argues that teams:

*which used mental space - through case discussions, supervision and shared working - helped a challenging client group, made a business case for resources, and was sensitive to the emotional undercurrents (p.2).*

Ann's story clearly exemplifies how professionals, if supported in modulating the intensity of their emotional responses, could potentially thrive and become capable of competently dealing with the emotional demands of their jobs even in difficult and adverse external circumstances. There is clear evidence which demonstrated the way in which Shirley had been able to create a responsive and containing space in which Ann's emotions had not been denied or avoided, but instead contained and experienced to a more bearable intensity. These positive experiences, coupled with an equally supportive relationship with her colleagues, played a crucial role in strengthening Ann's emotional resilience. When Shirley went on maternity leave, Ann succeeded in developing an equally positive and supporting relationship with the new manager, Amanda. This level of support had not gone unnoticed by other colleagues. Sustained by this supporting and responsive relationship with the new manager, Ann succeeded in internalising (Segal, 1988) the positive and nurturing qualities she had previously experienced in both her relationship with Shirley and her colleagues. In return, this process appeared to strengthen Ann's emotional resilience, giving her more confidence in her own internal resources and reinforcing her ability to better tolerate adverse external and environmental circumstances

At the same time, another important aspect emerged from the data gathered as part of this thesis. Amongst all participants, there was a unanimous consensus that practitioners had highly valued when someone, from within their organisation or team, created a sense of protection and safety in which they could freely operate in order to safeguard vulnerable children and their families.

Falk (1988) whilst setting out the key ideas underpinning the 'membership perspective' points out the importance clear boundaries have in enhancing the sense of belonging and protection for teams or organisations. Directly drawing on some of the key ideas underpinning biology, he coins the term 'conditional accessibility' and argues that group or organisational boundaries perform a function similar to the cell's membrane. Not everything gets through and, consequently, this enhances the sense of safety and belonging of its members.

Kelly, Kathryn and Ann all spoke with gratitude whilst describing various incidents in which their manager, Shirley, had succeeded in protecting them. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ann mentioned a situation where Shirley had left 'in place and sort of made a direction that the only person on the team that could communicate' with a rather hostile service user 'was her and that she'd do it in writing'. Similarly, Kelly acknowledged that she was aware that her manager had shielded her (and the rest of the team) from some of the issues that were taking place on a higher level. During our second interview she explicitly mentioned that she had always valued how Shirley had always considered her own safety which resulted in occasionally asking senior management ('this is how I need you to support Kelly'). Within the Italian context, Francesca similarly spoke of the relief in realising that the professional regulatory body had decided to join her and her colleagues in suing for slander one of the senior managers in her LA who had made some derogatory comments in an interview that had been published in a newspaper.

Conversely, in chapter 5, I presented how Kelly described when a senior manager came to her and announced that the Ofsted inspectors were coming ('if you're stressing that's going to filter'). I also described how, during the second team meeting I observed, the lack of perceived safety within the LA offices had undermined their sense of security and increased the level of anxieties within the team. These can be considered good examples of the way in which a lack of strong boundaries (either these being physical or psychological) might affect practitioners' emotional experiences.

In the same chapter, I argued that the unsettling and more paranoid feelings of ongoing suspicion, which were more evident within the English context, probably also

heightened by the imminent Ofsted inspection, and had made it more difficult for the professionals to be reached from an emotional point of view, more 'defended' as Hollway and Jefferson (2012) have described. It thus appears that when the sense of mistrust within society towards the social work profession is higher, it becomes more difficult for individuals and organisations to create a positive and nurturing working environment which promotes and encourages the 'learning from experience' process (Bion, 1962) and the positive modulation of their emotional experiences. This is an aspect that was particularly poignant for the English participants who stressed the importance for them of feeling sufficiently protected by their team and/or organisation.

The more uncertain, unpredictable and threatening the external environment is, the stronger and clearly defined the team or organisation boundaries should become. The existence of strong and clearly defined boundaries can not only increase the practitioners' sense of belonging and safety, but enhance their ability to modulate the intensity of the emotions they experience daily to a level that can improve their emotional resilience. More importantly, it may enable to protect them from negative projections coming from the wider child protection system.

### *7.3.3 Professional Resilience: a dynamic feature.*

Therefore, the data strongly suggests that it is impossible to disentangle front-line practitioners' emotional vicissitudes from their working environment, one cannot be considered in isolation from the other. In particular, it transpires that practitioners' ability to positively deal with the emotional demands of their work, could be constructed, analysed and understood as a dynamic feature, stemming from the interaction between their individuals' personal emotional resilience and the professional context in which they work. I would suggest calling this dynamic theoretical construct 'professional resilience'. The shift of attention from individual's emotional resilience to the construct of 'professional resilience, can enable us to fully appreciate that social workers' ability to deal with the demands of their work is a life-long process which necessitates of a positive, emotionally attuned and responsive environment. Within such situation, professionals can have the opportunity to thrive and to enrich their own internal

emotional resources, which in turn make them more capable of practising safely and competently in safeguarding vulnerable children and their families. Ann's story exemplifies how professionals, when suitably supported by a responsive environment can further enhance their knowledge, skills and professional confidence even when dealing with difficult and complex cases in adverse circumstances.

#### *7.4 Implication for practice: some suggestions*

In this concluding section I will firstly consider some of the ways in which practitioners' emotional resilience can be promoted. I will then try to address and identify some strategies that can be utilised to promote the creation of a supporting working environment for social workers.

##### *7.4.1 Social workers' professional resilience: a never-ending process.*

In the previous section, I mentioned Henry's conceptualisation of 'double deprivation' (Henry, 1974). I argued that professionals, when exposed to an unresponsive and uncontained working environment, might experience a similar double deprivation. The first deprivation is created by the nature of their work, whilst the second can be created by 'external circumstances over which [t]he[y] had no control whatsoever' (p.89).

As social workers have indeed very little control over the external circumstances surrounding their work, it is therefore essential to strengthen their internal resources. Social workers should therefore be supported and encouraged to freely explore, acknowledge and reflect on their own emotions from the outset of their training. Ann's story provides convincing evidence of how a responsive and supportive environment can significantly improve professionals' emotional resilience, which in return can better equip them to face the challenges of their daily job. It is important to consider that Ann, at the beginning of the fieldwork, had just completed her ASYE and she had always fondly spoken of the support and encouragement she had received since beginning her



university training. This suggests that, as Vellacott (2007) has strongly argued, external circumstances can indeed foster and increase individuals' emotional resilience. Social work training should therefore focus on promoting an ability for students to 'learn from experience' (Bion, 1962) allowing them to be fully prepared to meet the challenges of front-line practitioners. In chapter 6 I pointed out Ann's initial ability to freely talk about her emotions and the way they were impacting on her work might have been linked to her recent completion of her social work training.

#### *7.4.2 The importance of a safe environment for practitioners' emotional resilience*

By looking closely at the stories of all the research participants, there was a shared agreement that they valued, within the supervisory setting, the opportunity to acknowledge, think and reflect on their own emotions. As discussed at length in the literature review chapter, there is a wealth of literature that addresses the importance of supervision in social work practice with children and families (Goddard and Hunt, 2011; Rogowski, 2011; Munro, 2012; Ruch, 2016; Turney and Ruch, 2018). A common theme amongst the published literature is the emphasis on supervision as a privileged, safe place in which emotions can be acknowledged, thought about, and constructively incorporated into practice discourses (Beddoe, 2012). It therefore appears that the published literature mainly conceptualises the supervisory setting as a 'psychological field' (Lewin, 1951) which can promote practitioners' ability to modulate the intensity of their emotional responses in a way that would allow them to identify good strategies to effectively cope with the demands of the external world or 'internalise new qualities into the internal object which can comfort or strengthen the personality' (Meltzer & Harris, 2013;19). At the same time, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, all research participants reported that they had highly appreciated when their manager, or someone within their organisation, actively shielded and protected them from anything or anyone who could try to affect their ability to perform their duties and responsibilities and spread a more paranoid and persecuting attitude. This aspect is particularly relevant within the English context where the overall texture of the child protection system appears to be permeated by a higher sense of mistrust. Considering the current demands that front-

line child protection practitioners experience in their daily work, it is therefore important that child protection teams and organisation can create a positive sense of security for their practitioners, by putting in place strategies to protect them, not to make them feel overly exposed and at the mercy of a punitive and vilifying system (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2014; Shoesmith, 2016). As described by Halton (2014) and Cooper and Lees (2014) when the organisational procedures become too rigid, professionals are often discouraged to make discretionary decisions, but instead create an obsessional-punitive atmosphere that 'can be more anxiety-provoking for staff than anxieties arising from the nature of the task'.

It is now important to consider whether it could be possible for a single person (i.e. the team manager) to offer team members suitable emotional containment and, simultaneously, protect them from whoever might try to affect their ability to work safely and competently. At this point, it is important to note that all research participants within the English team, unanimously reported that they felt highly emotionally supported and contained when Shirley and her then deputy Jean were working together (see chapter 5). According to the participants' narratives, Shirley and Jean not only appeared to be capable of promoting a positive working environment, containing anxieties, and stimulating thinking amongst their team members, but they also did well in protecting their team members from some of the discussions that had been happening at a more senior level. At the same time, they seemed equally capable of encouraging and promoting the personal and professional development of their team members. Following Jean's departure, Shirley struggled to hold the team together. She had lost an important working partner and struggled to suitably promote a positive acknowledgement of the emotional demands of the work and simultaneously protect her team members from whoever tried to negatively sow persecution. Unfortunately, the deputy team manager who had replaced Jean never seemed to be able to fully succeed in filling the gaps left by her predecessor. After Jean's departure, Shirley did indeed attempt to maintain the same sense of security for all her team members, but inevitably struggled. The attitude Shirley demonstrated during Ann's supervision (see chapter 6), in which she came across as overly competent and could have been seen to somehow deskill Ann, can be considered evidence of her struggle to carry the responsibility to both promote a space

in which it was possible for practitioners to reflect on their emotions and, simultaneously, protect her team member from a hostile external environment. Later in the fieldwork, although Amanda, the new manager, succeeded in creating a constructive working relationship with Ann, she nonetheless failed to acknowledge the level of support and nurture that was offered to Ann by other team members. This could equally be considered an understandable struggle on her part to consistently acknowledge and promote a good level of thinking and reflection across all team members. It is therefore important for LAs to be able to create working environments which can shield its members from the obsessional punitive aspects of the wider child protection system, especially within the English context.

Furthermore, it appears that practitioners should be supported in becoming more familiar with the ways that organisational dynamics might affect their work. A better understanding of the way the working environment can affect social workers everyday work might enhance their ability to effectively and constructively adapt to the external demands of their work. Interestingly, it was amongst the Italian participants that a suggestion of how to enhance this understanding was spontaneously offered. All the participants acknowledged that the time they felt most supported was when they were offered targeted help from someone external, someone who encouraged them to reflect on their emotions and the way in which their emotional responses impacted their work who was not directly linked to their working environment. For example, during my second interview with Giuliana, she spoke at length of the support she received from a psychotherapist who helped her in a very difficult situation where there were serious concerns that three siblings may have been sexually abused by their father. Similarly, during our first interview, Giorgia acknowledged that she really enjoyed the supervision meetings the LA had organised with two external professionals where she:

*presented this situation and other colleagues shared their thoughts with the rest of the group as well. We had some colleagues from other teams as well, and each of us actively contributed to the discussion. It was very useful.*

It thus appears that an external person, who is not part of the team dynamics, might be perceived by practitioners as having the required level of 'detachment', an adjective

Kathryn has often utilised, from their team and organisational dynamics. This in return can offer practitioners the opportunity to 'hold thinking and feeling, process and task together' (Turney and Ruch, 2018;134) and the inevitable benefits that this situation will bring to their own practice. It will therefore be left to team managers or someone else within the organisation to focus on how to create a safe and protected environment for their practitioners to encourage them not to separate their emotional experiences with the actions of care they perform as part of their roles within a safe environment.

## **8 Chapter: Conclusions.**

Within this concluding chapter I am firstly going to briefly summarise the main findings of the thesis research and highlight some of the potential implications they might have for social work practice.

I will then review the methodological approach utilised for this thesis, alongside reflecting of the strengths and limitations of the research design I utilised.

Thirdly, I will review my own learning to date following the completion of this research project. Finally, I am going to discuss how I would like to move forward and further develop some of the findings discussed within this thesis.

### *8.1 Main findings: a brief summary*

Data collected as part of this thesis strongly suggest that social workers emotional experiences cannot be understood separately from the working environment in which they operate as they are 'contradictory parts of a unified whole that could not be considered independently from each other' (Miller, 2002;594). In the previous chapter I argued that, the social worker ability to satisfactorily cope with the emotional demands of their work, which I defined 'professional resilience', can be conceptualised as a dynamic feature which is determined by the interaction between individual personal emotional resilience and the professional context in which they work.

Although other research and literature have looked at the role played by the working environment in social work practice (Foster, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2018 amongst others) the longitudinal component of the research design alongside having considered teams in two different countries offer a unique insight into the lives of front line practitioners and the way they mediate between the emotional demands of their work and the external components of their job.

The influence of the overall professional context in affecting professionals' ability to acknowledge, discuss and consider their emotional experiences was particularly evident

in the way participants in the two countries, Italy and England, initially approached the fieldwork. As I have argued in chapter 5, the more suspicious, punitive and controlling atmosphere that permeated the English fieldwork, had played a crucial role in my both my initial struggle to build up a positive working alliance with the participants and their ability to freely talk about their emotions. Conversely, the presence of a more relaxed and less controlling context in Italy may have given participants in Italy the opportunity to be more in touch with their emotions and, consequently, to freely share them during our interviews.

Considering and conceptualising social workers' professional resilience as a function of their working environment leads us to consider another crucial point. When organisations succeed in creating a containing, nurturing and responsive environment not only they are likely to exponentially increase front-line practitioners' professional resilience, but also make them more able to practice safely and competently in safeguarding vulnerable children and their families. Ann story, which was presented in chapter 6, provides compelling evidence of the benefits, for social workers, of being able to rely on an emotionally attuned environment (Winnicott, 1965). Conversely, in the opposite situation, when organisations cannot sufficiently support their staff from an emotional point of view, this could create a situation similar to the one described by Henry (1974) in which social workers might experience an emotional double deprivation where the first deprivation comes from the nature of their unquestionably emotionally demanding job, the second from the unresponsive environment. Furthermore, as evidenced in Kathryn's story and contrary to popular perception, if the working environment becomes emotionally unresponsive and the organisational defences too rigid, professionally resilient practitioners are likely to be amongst the first to leave their jobs. From a psychodynamic perspective, an emotionally resilient person is someone who can rely on robust and strong internal emotional resources. They are inclined to consider their work as being useful to those dependent on them and, more importantly, tend to conform their behaviour according to the standards set up by their internal objects more than the external ones. Therefore, if the external circumstances would start interfering with their ability to safeguard vulnerable, emotionally resilient practitioners may not be willing to compromise their work and might, consequently, find

alternative employment. On the other hand, practitioners who are less resilient might not be equally able to challenge the organisational defences and rigid structure but instead identify with those rigid and punitive aspects. This situation, in return, inevitably affect their ability to better empathise with the people they work with. It is therefore vital for organisations to offer a nurturing and safe environment for their practitioners, which in return will enable them to retain competent practitioners and allow them to satisfactorily protect vulnerable children and their families.

Within the literature review chapter great emphasis was placed on the importance supervision occupies in child protection social work practice (Ruch, 2012; Beddoe, 2013; Ingram, 2014; Turney and Ruch, 2018). Research participants, although acknowledging the importance of the supervisory relationship, they also stressed the importance for their organisations to put in place strategies or actions that would safeguard and protect them in their work. This was a particularly strong theme within the English participants. They unanimously reported that they had highly valued when their manager, or someone within their organisation, had actively made efforts to protect and shield them from whoever tried to compromise their safety and welfare.

Considering the demands of child protection work, it can be difficult for a single person (i.e. the team manager) to effectively provide sufficient emotional containment and to support an emotionally responsive environment and, simultaneously, protect its members from anyone who tried to create a more mistrustful and persecutory atmosphere (Meltzer and Harris, 2013). All research participants in both countries have indeed reported to have greatly benefitted from a separation of the 'managerial' (Rogowski, 2012) and 'reflective' (Beddoe, 2012) components of the supervision. Creating privileged and safer places in which professionals can mainly focus on their own emotions and freely reflect on the way in which they affected their daily work (Wiener et al, 2003) appears to enhance their ability to contain and modulate the intensity of their emotional responses, which in return increases their professional resilience. It, therefore, appears important for Local Authorities to provide additional spaces for their practitioners where they can freely discuss, recognise, and acknowledge their own feelings and emotions, preferably supported by someone external, who is not directly involved and part of professionals' organisational dynamics.

These new opportunities can enhance social workers' ability to practice safely and competently. The stories of all participants in Italy and England seem to provide evidence of the advantages that these additional 'reflective' opportunities might have on social workers' ability to better empathise with the experiences of the people they work with.

## 8.2 Methodology: strengths and weaknesses.

This thesis was designed to obtain a greater understanding of the role played by emotions in child protection social work practice. The ontological premises of this thesis rely on the idea that emotions are intrinsically a psycho-social phenomenon (Day Sclater et al, 2009). McNaughton (2013) alongside the work of Turner (2005) (chapter 2) captures the psycho-social component of emotions, describing them as being

*physiologically determined, internally experienced and natural, a component of reason, a medium for the transmission of socio-cultural values and the result of socio-cultural practices (p.72)*

I was therefore interested in obtaining a better understanding of the way in which front-line practitioners mediated between the emotional demands of their work and the statutory duties and responsibilities of their job. The public outrage that followed the death of Peter Connelly (Warner, 2014) and the unprecedented number of reviews of social work education and practice (SWRF, 2009, Laming, 2009; Munro, 2012; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014) increased my curiosity in understanding the influence that the broader child protection system could have on the emotional experiences of front-line practitioners. To be able to better understand the role played by the emotional texture of the child protection system in front-line daily life I adopted a multiple case study design (Yin, 2009). Due to my personal and professional background, which gave me a unique insight into their practice contexts, professionals from two different child protection teams, one in Italy and one in England, therefore became the units of analysis (Baxter and Jack, 2008). I have utilised a variety of methods of data collection to fully capture the complexities of the emotional experiences of the research participants (see chapter



3): in-depth interviews, psychoanalytically informed observations of team meeting discussions and supervision sessions and I also succeeded in getting six out of eight participants to complete individual adaptations of the FLS activity. Finally, throughout the fieldwork I kept accurate reflective notes in which I recorded my thoughts and feelings related to my research with the expectations that my experience would somehow resonate with the experience of the research participants. In hindsight, I have to acknowledge the benefits of my original decision to interview practitioners several times over a substantially long time. Undoubtedly, this has given me a unique opportunity to closely observe and analyse fluctuations in the participants' emotional experiences. At the same time, it is also important to highlight the advantages of having utilised a psycho-social approach. It is undeniable that, without a close and ongoing consideration to my own emotional responses, I would have not been able to obtain such a deep understanding of the participants' emotional experiences.

However, considering the struggles I experienced at the beginning of my fieldwork in building up a positive working alliance within the English context, in hindsight I often wondered whether I should have utilised more interactive and creative activities in order to gather further data. As described in the previous chapter, the adaptation of the FLS activity had facilitated the interaction with Kathryn during our second interview. Therefore, utilising more interactive activities may have given me the opportunity to break through their level of initial mistrust and suspicions in a quicker, easier way. Similarly, within the Italian context I could have planned some additional ethnographic observations (Patton, 2003) in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the team and organisational dynamics, especially considering that I never had the opportunity to observe any individual supervision sessions.

Furthermore, in hindsight I should have been more confident in my own ability of making sense of the complexity and richness of the data I had collected during my research. As discussed in chapter 4, I defensively resorted in utilising a pre-determined theoretical framework rather than experiencing the inevitable unsettling feelings of 'not knowing' that every researcher experience whilst initially approaching raw data. Although I was later able to reflect and learn from that experience (Bion, 1962), I nonetheless came to

realise how enriching is, from a researcher point of view, to freely listen without any preconceived ideas the participants' stories.

Finally, as discussed in chapter 3, during the fieldwork I faced some important ethical dilemmas. Initially, I encountered significant difficulties in gathering data as I had originally planned. Within the English context, several meetings and/or observation sessions, within the English context, were either cancelled at the last minute or, in few instances, I have never been informed that they had been cancelled so I unnecessarily turned up at the Local Authority offices. As these incidents mainly happened during the first part of the fieldwork, I often felt torn between my desire to complete the fieldwork and fear that participants' might decide to withdraw from the research. Although participants verbally continued to express their desire to continue in being part of the research, their behaviour suggested otherwise. Admittedly, dealing with this level of uncertainty has not been an easy task. On reflection, I now realise I should have probably been more consistent and determined in making sure, within the English context, that cancelled appointments would be rescheduled more promptly. In the final phase of my thesis, instead, I often questioned how I could fully protect practitioners' anonymity. During the writing stage, I had to carefully ponder what level of information I could include in this thesis in order to preserve participants' anonymity. As previously stated, I also modified some of their characteristics in order to make it more difficult to identify them. Unfortunately, this also meant that relevant and pertinent information, which could have strengthened even further some of the points raised throughout this thesis, has not been included in order to protect participants' identity. Personally, I found this particular aspect particularly difficult as I was often torn between the desire to offer an honest and transparent account of events as I had encountered them and the ethical obligation of protecting participants' anonymity. I hope that in this thesis, I have managed to find the right balance between these two important aspects.

### 8.3 Reflection on my overall research journey and future directions

In previous chapters I have discussed some of the complexities and dilemmas I have encountered within my research journey and my original defensive use of the Meltzer and Harris (2013) model. In this section I would like to present and reflect on my own learnings by undertaking this research project. Spending time with the research participants, observing them during their supervisions sessions and their team meeting discussions and listening to their own stories during our interviews increased my respect and admiration for social workers commitment to the people they work with. On a daily basis, social workers deal with highly complex and difficult situations within uncertain and equally complex working environments. The stories of the people they work with inevitably resonate in their own emotional experiences, often in a rather overwhelming manner. All the research participants have therefore been instrumental in making me fully appreciate the importance for them to remain able to 'be touched' emotionally by the stories of the people they work with. Their emotional participation invariably makes them more capable to empathise with the service users' individual circumstances and can enhance their ability to make their work more effective. Despite the difficulties I encountered in gathering the required data, in hindsight I am now even more grateful to the research participants for having given me the opportunity to complete my research as I had originally planned. I will be forever grateful to them for having given me the opportunity to understand their emotional experiences.

The findings presented within this thesis can be useful for Local Authorities to identify suitable practical ways in which they can support their front-line practitioners from an emotional point of view. More importantly, they could be utilised by policy makers to reflect on the need to reduce the level of paranoia and mistrust that has now become an intrinsic component of the English child protection system. Conversely, within the Italian context, there might be opportunities for organisations and policy makers to increase the level of formalised support for social workers. Currently, it appears that the level of emotional and practical support offered to front-line staff mainly depends on the way in which individual organisations are organised. This means that there might be significant

differences between neighbourhood Local Authorities, which in return can have massive impact on social workers' emotional experiences.

In this concluding chapter, it is important for me to acknowledge that I have mainly focussed my discussion and analysis on the emotional experiences of the English participants. Even when reflecting on Giorgia's story, I have later utilised the learning that came from a deep understanding of her situation to enhance my understanding of the complexity of the relationship between English social workers and their working environment.

It is nonetheless important to continue to promote research which investigate the same phenomenon across different countries and cultures as it can increase the understanding of the importance external and internal aspects of social work practice interact with one another to shape the intensity and quality of the emotional experiences of front-line practitioners. At the same time, directly drawing from the findings of the current research, it might be equally useful to undertake longitudinal research in which is possible to study the emotional experiences of a group of front-line practitioners over a longer period time with the opportunity to follow them in the various steps of their careers.

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## **10 Appendix 1: CIS**

### *Research Question*

*What is known about the role emotions play in social work practice with Children and Families and their relationship with the working environment within both the Italian and English contexts?*

### *Searching for the Literature*

An initial broad search was conducted using electronic databases such as SCOPUS, ASSIA and Social Care Online using only the key words ‘emotion\*’ OR “feeling\*” OR “affect\*” AND ‘social work\*’. In this instance, a substantial number of articles retrieved focused on the service users’ emotional experience rather than that of the social workers themselves. Titles and abstracts were screened in order to include articles that would be relevant to the research question. Throughout the entire search process, a constructive reflective approach was maintained to identify relevant material based on its importance and relevance towards the main aim of the current review. Alongside articles identified through the original database searches, other relevant papers were identified by searching amongst the articles’ bibliographies and by expanding the search to literature from other fields such as psychotherapy, medical education and education. Solely theoretical papers which were deemed to be relevant for the purposes of the review were also included. Simultaneously, a similar search was carried out within the relevant published Italian literature through the Istiss (Istituto per gli Studi sui Servizi Sociali<sup>10</sup>) database. The search was undertaken using the key words ‘assistente sociale’ AND ‘emozioni’ OR ‘sentimenti’.

### *Sampling*

One of the major strengths of Dixon-Woods et al (2006) approach is that it allows flexibility in terms of searching strategies and it gives researchers the possibility of utilising different searching strategies simultaneously. Therefore, the purpose of

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<sup>10</sup> Institute for the Social Work studies.

sampling, in interpretive synthesis, is 'on the development of concepts and theory rather than on exhaustive summary of all data (Dixon-Wood et al, 2006;3). Major and Savin-Baden (2012) reinforce their position even further by affirming that a purposive sampling, similar to sampling procedures used in primary qualitative research, can be efficiently used in this kind of review. For the current review a variety of papers from different ontological and epistemological approaches have been considered and included in the current review.

#### *Determination of Quality – Data Extraction*

Dixon-Wood and colleagues (2006), contend that researchers should consider papers mainly based on their relevance towards the scope of the review rather than according to 'particular methodological standards' (p.6). However, they nonetheless advocate for the use of formal critical appraisal tools in which 'all forms of research are valued and appreciated for their strengths as well as their limitations' (Dodd and Epstein, 2012;7). For this review, Orme and Shemmings' (2012) summarisation of the strategic messages involved in critical appraisal and data extraction has been considered and utilised. They identify five key points reviewers should consider when appraising the quality of a particular paper:

- *How relevant is the study to the review question?*
- *How much information does it contribute?*
- *How trustworthy are its findings?*
- *How generalizable are its findings?*
- *Was it conducted ethically? (Orme and Shemmings, 2012;75)*

Their appraisal tool consequently appeared to be sufficiently flexible to appropriately evaluate the quality and relevance of epistemologically and methodologically different papers that have been published for a variety of different academic and practical purposes.

### *Conducting an Interpretive Synthesis*

In order to produce a 'synthetic construct' of the identified literature regarding the role played by emotions in social work practice in children and families services and their relationship with the working environment, it was therefore essential to integrate evidence from a variety of different sources into a 'coherent theoretical framework comprising a network of constructs and the relationships between them (Dixon-Wood et al, 2006;5). From a methodological point of view the seven steps for the synthesis of primary qualitative studies as highlighted by Noblit and Hare (1998) have guided the current review:

- 1- Getting started;
- 2- Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest;
- 3- Reading the studies;
- 4- Determining how the studies are related;
- 5- Translating the studies into one another;
- 6- Synthesising translation;
- 7- Expressing synthesis (Noblit and Hare, 1998)

## 11 Appendix 2: Kathryn's story – First Interview

**Int:** In which way do you find child protection fitting more with who you are? In which way do you enjoy more, this kind of work?

*R:* It's very interesting and there's a lot more problem solving to do. There's so much to learn and there's no two days are the same. I quite enjoy doing court work, don't particularly like giving evidence if the person is against me but I like it when they're not! So you can be in court one day and then another day you spend a couple of hours in a foster carer's garden playing with a group of children.

**Int:** From an emotional point of view, what kind of emotional responses do you commonly have in relation to your work?

*R:* What do you mean there?

**Int:** Emotional responses, what kind of emotions do you experience during your work?

*R:* I suppose the whole range but I think you have to remain a little bit detached from what's going on otherwise there's got to be someone there to sort things out.

**Int:** But in which way do these emotional responses affect your work, if they affect your work?

*R:* I don't know there. I always want to do the best that I can, sometimes it gets a bit draining, I suppose my emotional responses, the most response that I sort of feel most strongly about is when sometimes you feel you're constantly criticised when you've worked very hard with somebody and there's always someone there saying, "You didn't do that right", "Have you not done that in time?", and then I get a bit downhearted and slap around the face and everyone knows I'm in a bit of a bad mood.

**Int:** Can you give me an example of a particular situation which you found particularly challenging from an emotional point of view?

*R:* I think this week, today, we had an adoption handover, it's been a long case that I came to relatively late and there's been a lot of criticism of the case, three children who through court, the process was very long and we got a placements order for them. We had argued interminably with the guardian, with the court, that the children may need to be split if we couldn't find a placement for three of them and we said that we would look for three months for all three of them, then in parallel, would look for two and a one.

*In that three months, a couple who had been approved, they were going to panel to be approved, they contacted us and it was a couple in our consortium, who someone here had assessed to say they were interested in this three and it looked like it was going brilliantly. But the lady was a headteacher, she was giving up work and she'd worked with challenging children and one of the children is quite delayed, she was confident she'd be able to help this child, it seemed like the ideal placement.*



We started introductions, had a midway meeting, check everything was going okay, everything seemed to be going brilliantly, "Yeah, going really well, they're really enjoying it, looking forward to next week", that was last Tuesday and on the Thursday, they had a bit of a wobble and they would only take two of the children, they didn't want one of them. That affected our whole team and also Adoption and we were stuck then with this dilemma, myself and the assessing social worker and I think it was affecting, we both said, "they're not having any of them then, that's it!", and rode over the moral high ground of our unicorn of righteousness.

**Int: Did the children start meeting them?**

R: Oh yeah, they were due to move on the Monday and it was a Thursday, they had a wobble, we met them on the Friday and they weren't going to take this one child, they didn't feel they could meet his needs. But the other two had bonded really well and so we were then left with the dilemma of do we go ahead with these two because we can't introducing people, would this happen again, "you've got a new mummy and daddy now" and I think today would have been, normally it would have been a really happy occasion but I couldn't bring myself to be congratulatory, I was polite and smiley but it was a bit tense, I have to say. So I think that's as far as it would go work wise, occasionally I've got angry with people but that's ...

**Int: Can you give me an example?**

R: When I was in fostering and I have done it with other people, where someone has done something ridiculously stupid, you ask them to do something, they don't do it, I can think of a man who's in court at the moment with his son and he's got to get this child out of the house more, he's almost like a pet in his bedroom and "No, no, I didn't do that today, no we didn't go out today", "why not?", in the end I'm going "you know you've got to do it, why aren't you doing it?", so I think that would affect the work but then sometimes I think they need to know you're a bit angry because it's not acceptable sometimes, what people do.

**Int: If we go back to three kids, I understand only two were adopted one was not ...**

R: The middle one.

**Int: So how did you feel? You were quite down, you couldn't really bring yourself to smile and ... it wasn't a closure to some extent.**

R: No it's not.

**Int: It's the beginning to some extent for the third one. How did you feel? Were you angry with the foster carer?**

R: No, angry with the adopters.

**Int: Sorry, the adopters, were you angry with them?**

R: Yes, I didn't show it though, they wouldn't have known. I really hoped we could suddenly find another couple who could take three and go, "there you go, it's worked!"

**Int:** I think that is a normal reaction ...

*R:* It might work for the [inaudible 00:12:15] and I think that's the way we've got to look at it as well.

**Int:** What is going to happen now to the middle child?

*R:* He's going to stay with that foster carer on his own and we'll look for other adopters, just for him. It was hard, it was sad, although when we told the children, his sister was really upset that he wasn't going to be going, I wouldn't say he was happy but he visibly relaxed so I thought maybe it's for the best, he hadn't bonded with them.

**Int:** Over time, what did you learn about yourself and your way of coping with this? Because as you said, you experience a massive range of emotions from quite happy, satisfied, to angry, cross, guilty, so how do you cope when there is something that is not going as expected?

*R:* I think you have to have a bit of emotional detachment from that, that's work, not home and not your personal life, otherwise you'd be constantly having a breakdown! I have to detach a little bit and say, "Let's sort this out" because everyone is looking to you to sort it.

**Int:** What you're saying is having work and your private life, that helps you ...

*R:* We have good laugh here as well, we often laugh about things.

**Int:** Are there any ways in which you would like to develop your way of coping with emotions, with the emotional aspect of your job?

*R:* In what way? I've not thought about it, I did the PAPS yesterday and the one, the portfolio I looked through, I thought "this person is never going to cope" and then I spoke to the assessor who I knew because we were on the same course, she said "she was a nightmare, I couldn't stand it", she said "no she's not going to cope", because I think you have to be quite emotionally strong because you can't get, I suppose that's it, you don't get emotionally involved with people, you do but you have to have that detachment.

There's some children that I can honestly say, that I love them, I think "you've got to do well here because ... don't see that side because I love them", I would say I would love them. But I do know they're not my family and you've still got to do the job and you can't do it if it was your family. You've got to be slightly detached from it.

[...]

**Int:** I think you already partially mentioned, how would you describe your relationship with your colleagues?

*R:* I think it's very good, I hope it is anyway! I think we have a good relationship, it's quite light on the team, we have quite a little bit of a laugh and ...

**Int:** Do you find these relationships supportive to your work?

*R: Oh yeah, sometimes, when you come back because we've all got service users as I'm sure you all remember, all good value for money, got a bit of a tale or they've got to see so and so, they go "how was it?", but I do find sometimes at home, you might tell a little story and everyone's going, they're weeping and then at work, everyone's laughing, so it kind of takes the lid off of it really.*

**Int:** I think it's also part of knowing what kind of job because from outside, social worker has always been seen as what you do but looked in a more curious way, rather than ... but if you do the job, you perfectly know there's sometimes a laugh.

*R: And you can also have a laugh with, you might describe a family and then when you go and see them, you think "oh that's not what I was expecting", you know? You think they're all right actually!*

**Int:** Can you give me an example where a colleague was particularly supportive and really helped you in a difficult situation?

*R: Emotionally, you mean?*

**Int:** Yes.

*R: I suppose like today, we've been very supportive of each other, myself and the assessing social worker are quite angry because we were the ones facing the people and children and the foster carer was quite angry and so ... we had discussions separate, that were a bit meaty, but then we found management, Shirley and June<sup>11</sup> were quite, they were saying "How did you cope with that today? Do you feel okay with that?", so you can talk it through and it's all right to feel like that, Shirley said, "We're a bit detached because we dip in and out and don't know the children so well, don't know the adopters so well or the foster carers so well", so they can make those kinds of decisions from an objective point of view rather than a very subject point of view, so yes that's been quite helpful.*

**Int:** Because as I said earlier on, thinking that usually fostering is the environment where it's easier to work to some extent, as you say there's long term, it's not that emergencies are not as many, I was wondering whether the different environments, the different colleagues, the different atmosphere of the team may have played a role in the way that you feel here and before?

*R: No, I've found most colleagues are supportive. You might get to know a couple of people and some better than others, so then you might have a big chat with them about how awful something was or how funny something was or whatever, but it's always a very supportive team.*

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<sup>11</sup> Fostering Manager

**Int:** How would you describe your relationship with your manager?

**R:** *I think it's good, yeah, I find it fine. I hope it's good! I think it's very good.*

**Int:** Has there been a time when you didn't feel fully understood by your manager?

**R:** *Yes, possibly, I think our manager tends to play devil's advocate an awful lot so she'll always put the other side across and there have been times when we haven't agreed, we haven't come to loggerheads or anything, I had a child who I felt, she'd been abandoned, we'd tried a unification home and it didn't work and we'd looked then at going for a care order and then higher up said, "No need for that, cost a lot of money", I think that possibly was it although you're never allowed to say that and then my manager supported that view, that we could manage it on a Section 20 and I said "I want it logged on my supervision that I didn't agree with that and why".*

**Int:** Did she do that?

**R:** *Yes, she did, I said "I don't agree with that and I'd like it logged and why", just in case it ever comes back, that they'll know that wasn't my decision.*

**Int:** But you do feel supported emotionally from the manager?

**R:** *Oh yes.*

**Int:** How do you cope now that she'll soon be going ...?

**R:** *I don't know.*

**Int:** I got the sense that it is quite a close, supportive environment ...

**R:** *I hope it will carry on the same with whoever comes and what my hope would be, we'll carry on the same as a team and anyone new would assimilate into that.*

## 12 Appendix 3: Listening Guide– Doucet and Mauthner

### Reading 1 – Relational and Reflexively Constituted Narratives

<i>Kathryn's words</i>	<i>My own reaction</i>
<p>"what do you mean there?"</p> <p>'I suppose the whole range... you need to remain a little bit detached</p>	<p>Her answers feel vague to me and she comes across as detached from me as well actually</p>
<p><i>'we both said 'they're not having any of them then, that's it!'" and rode over the high ground of unicorn of righteousness'</i></p>	<p>This appears to be a retaliatory reaction to the adoption parents' attitude (more paranoid schizoid state of mind).</p>
<p>'we were left with a dilemma'</p> <p>So I think that's as far as it would go work wise, occasionally I've got angry with people but that's it</p>	<p>At least she is honest and acknowledges the complexity of the situation of this group of siblings.</p>
<p>'I didn't show it though, they wouldn't have known. I really hoped we could find another couple who could take three and go 'there you go, it's worked'</p> <p>It was hard, it was sad, although when we told the children, his sister was really upset that he wasn't going to be going. I wouldn't say he was happy but he visibly relaxed, so I thought maybe it's for the best</p>	<p>She tries to control her own feelings although it appears that she acknowledges that the child seems to be more relaxed now, even though things didn't go as she expected.</p> <p>She acknowledges the child's situation despite her own struggles (more depressive state of mind)</p>
<p><i>I think you have to have a bit of</i></p>	<p>Again, she keeps repeating the word</p>

<i>emotional detachment from that, that's work, not home and not your personal life, otherwise you'd be constantly having a breakdown! I have to detach a little bit and say, "Let's sort this out" because everyone is looking to you to sort it.</i>	'detachment'
I think you have to be quite emotionally strong because you can't get, I suppose that's it, you don't get emotionally involved with people, you do but you have to have that detachment.	Here again, she talks about being detached, you shouldn't get emotionally involved but she also says that social workers should be quite emotionally strong.

## Reading 2 Tracing Narrated Subjects

<i>Kathryn's words</i>	<i>My own comments:</i>
I quite enjoy doing court work, don't particularly like giving evidence if the person is against me but I like it when they're not!	She comes across as being particularly passionate about her work.
I sort of feel most strongly about is when sometimes you feel you're constantly criticised when you've worked very hard with somebody and there's always someone there saying 'you didn't do that right'. 'have you not done that in time?'.	Again, she seems to be quite competent and confident about her work and her abilities. Do not comes across as arrogant though
<i>I get a bit downhearted and slap around the face and everyone knows I'm in a bit of a bad mood.</i>	She acknowledges her own negative emotions.

I couldn't bring myself to be congratulatory, I was polite and smiley, but it was a bit tense, I have to say.	Again, quite honest in acknowledging negative feelings and emotions and their potential impact on her work.
<i>... in the end I'm going "you know you've got to do it, why aren't you doing it?", so I think that would affect the work but then sometimes I think they need to know you're a bit angry because it's not acceptable sometimes, what people do.</i>	Transparent in her relationship with people she works with.
<i>I spoke to the assessor who I knew because we were on the same course, she said "she was a nightmare, I couldn't stand it", she said "no she's not going to cope"</i>	She comes across as someone who can speak her mind
<i>There're some children that I can honestly say, that I love them, I think "you've got to do well here because ... don't see that side because I love them", I would say I would love them. But I do know they're not my family and you've still got to do the job and you can't do it if it was your family. You've got to be slightly detached from it.</i>	She seems to acknowledge the differences between personal and professional relationship.
<i>I think it's very good, I hope it is anyway! I think we have a good relationship, it's</i>	She seems able to verbalise her opinions about the nature of her relationship with

<i>quite light on the team, we have quite a little bit of a laugh and ...</i>	her manager and other team members
<i>I do find sometimes at home, you might tell a little story and everyone's going, they're weeping and then at work, everyone's laughing, so it kind of takes the lid off of it really.</i>	Humour as a way of coping with some of the stress at work.
<i>I suppose like today, we've been very supportive of each other</i>	Positive feedback regarding her working environment
<i>I think it's good, yeah, I find it fine. I hope it's good! I think it's very good.</i>	Her own opinion and hope regarding the nature of the relationship with her manager.
<i>and I said "I want it logged on my supervision that I didn't agree with that and why".</i>	She seems quite capable to verbalise her disagreement
<i>Yes, she did, I said "I don't agree with that and I'd like it logged and why", just in case it ever comes back, that they'll know that wasn't my decision.</i>	Strong 'I' where she appears to be able to protect her own practice.



### Reading 3 Reading for relational narrated subjects

<i>Kathryn's words</i>	<i>Comments:</i>
<b>We</b> started introductions,	
That affected our <b>whole team</b> and also Adoption and we were stuck then with this dilemma,	
<b>We</b> have good laugh here as well, <b>we</b> often laugh about things.	
when you come back because <b>we've</b> all got service users as I'm sure you all remember, all good value for money, got a bit of a tale or they've got to see so and so, they go "how was it?"	
And you can also <b>have a laugh with</b> , you might describe a family and then when you go and see them, you think "oh that's not what I was expecting", you know? You think they're all right actually	
<b>we</b> had discussions separate, that were a bit meaty, but then <b>we</b> found management, Shirley and June <sup>12</sup> were quite, they were	

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<sup>12</sup> Fostering Manager

saying “ <b>How did you cope with that today?</b> Do you feel okay with that?”	
<b>our</b> manager tends to play devil's advocate an awful lot so she'll always put the other side across and there have been times when we haven't agreed, <b>we</b> haven't come to loggerheads or anything	

#### Reading 4 Reading for structured subjects

<i>Kathryn's words</i>	<i>Comments:</i>
there's been a lot of criticism of the case, three children who through court, the process was very long and we got a placements order for them. We had argued interminably with the guardian, with the court, that the children may need to be split if we couldn't find a placement for three of them	Impact of the overall system on her work
<i>you can talk it through and it's all right to feel like that, Shirley said, "We're a bit detached because we dip in and out and don't know the children so well, don't know the adopters so well or the foster carers so well", so they can make those kinds of decisions from an objective point of view rather than a very subject point of view, so yes that's been quite helpful.</i>	Relationship with the senior management

### **13 Appendix 4: Information Sheet for Managers**



University of Sussex

#### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:**

***Project Title:*** An exploration of how child protection social workers in England and Italy mediate the emotional demands and professional requirements of their work

##### Invitation to Participate:

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex – Alberto Poletti. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

##### What is the purpose of the study?

In recent years there has been an increased understanding of the role played by emotions in social work practice, with concepts like ‘emotional resilience’ and ‘emotional intelligence’ having become part of professionals’ everyday language. As a result, it would be helpful for the profession to develop a better understanding of the daily emotional challenges faced by social workers in child protection settings in order to inform the development of more suitable support for front-line practitioners (e.g. workplace supervision, which considers the emotional dimension of the work).

I will be doing this through analysing in detail how members of two teams (one in England and one in Italy) mediate the emotional demands of their job and the professional requirements of their role in order to practice safely and competently. I have approached your team as one of the two ‘case studies’.

##### Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. However, even if you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time, up until the time of the first draft of my thesis (in approximately 18 months time). If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information you have provided will be destroyed and will not be included in the research.

### What will happen to me if I take part?

Data will be collected over a period of 8/10 months and this will involve:

- One interview with you. The interview will be conducted at your current place of work or another mutually agreed location. With your agreement, I will audio-record the interview and then transcribe the interview in full to have an accurate record of what was said. I will keep the recording secure and destroy it once I have completed the study. If you prefer not to be recorded, I shall take notes during the interview instead. I shall keep all recordings, transcripts and notes separate from any information that identifies you. The interview will last up to an hour.
- Four observations of your supervision sessions with three of your supervisees (I will undertake the observations approximately every two months);
- Four observations of team meeting discussions (I will observe one team meeting approximately every two months);
- An observation of the interactive activity with the rest of your team members based on the Family Life Space (FLS) activity. This activity, which is a graphic-symbolic instrument, aims to investigate group relations. It is an interactive instrument involving joint graphic tasks, in which all team members partake and offer an invaluable opportunity to gather useful information on the dynamics of the teams organisation (Tamanza & Gozzoli, 1997).

### What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No risk to participants is envisaged and I will arrange the observations and meetings at a time convenient for you and your team.

### What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefit to research participants for participating in this research. However, you will be contributing to the enhancement of the understanding of emotional challenges practitioners encounter in their daily work, and thus to the current developments and debates in social work education.

### Will my information in this study be kept confidential?

The interview data, whether written or recorded, and all observational notes will be securely kept into a key locked secured safe. In accordance to the Data Protection Act 1998, names will be replaced with codes to ensure that your identity is protected. All information recorded and my notes will be anonymised and every effort will be made to ensure you are not identified in any of these reports. However, due to the distinctive role you hold within your Team, your identity might be recognisable to the other participants. It will therefore be important that you hold this in mind during the interview. However, I might have to breach confidentiality in the unlikely event that, during the fieldwork, I

should encounter poor practice that may result in exposing vulnerable people to serious harm. In this instance, I will firstly discuss my concerns with you and my supervisor before reporting them to the relevant authorities. On completing the interview I shall invite you to say whether, on reflection, there is anything you have said that you would prefer I did not use in the study. Once I have transcribed the interview, I will send you a copy of the transcript so you can verify what has been said and make any comments if you wish to.

#### What will happen to the results of the research study?

The interview data will be used for my final year Doctoral Thesis, conference presentations, publications, and teaching. I will do my utmost to present an accurate account of participants' views in my report. However, my report will also reflect my own understanding of your views, in combination with others. I am therefore seeking your permission to do this.

#### Who has approved this study?

The current study has been approved by the Cross-School Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex where I am enrolled as a doctoral student, and by the IASR (Institute of Applied Social Research) Ethics Committee at the University of Bedfordshire where I work as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work. The current study has also been approved by the Ethics Committee within your own Local Authority.

#### Contact for further information:

If you have any further questions about the study, please do feel free to contact me, Alberto Poletti, University of Bedfordshire, Park Square, Luton LU1 3JU. Tel: +44 (0)1582 489382, or email: [Alberto.Poletti@beds.ac.uk](mailto:Alberto.Poletti@beds.ac.uk) .

If you have any concerns about this research, or the manner in which the study has been conducted you can contact my supervisor, Dr Michelle Lefevre at the following address: University of Sussex, Essex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9HR [M.Lefevre@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:M.Lefevre@sussex.ac.uk) or +44 (0)1273 877656.

THANK YOU for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Yours sincerely

Alberto Poletti

## **14 Appendix 5: Information Sheet for Practitioners**



University of Sussex

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:**

***Project Title:*** An exploration of how child protection social workers in England and Italy mediate the emotional demands and professional requirements of their work

#### Invitation to Participate:

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex – Alberto Poletti. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

In recent years there has been an increased understanding of the role played by emotions in social work practice, with concepts like ‘emotional resilience’ and ‘emotional intelligence’ having become part of professionals’ everyday language. As a result, it would be helpful for the profession to develop a better understanding of the daily emotional challenges faced by social workers in child protection settings in order to inform the development of more suitable support for front-line practitioners (e.g. workplace supervision which considers the emotional dimension of the work).

I will be doing this through analysing in detail how members of two teams (one in England and one in Italy) mediate the emotional demands of their job and the professional requirements of their role in order to practice safely and competently. I have approached your team as one of the two ‘case studies’

#### Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you want take part. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. However, even if you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time, up until the time of the first draft of my thesis (in approximately 18 months time). If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information you have provided will be destroyed and will not be included in the research.

#### What will happen to me if I take part?

Data will be collected over a period of 8/10 months and this will involve:

- Four interviews (approximately one every two months). The interviews will be conducted at your current place of work or another mutually agreed location. With your agreement, I will record the interviews and transcribe them in full to have an accurate record of what was said. I will keep the recording secure and destroy it once I have completed the study. If you prefer not to be recorded, I shall take notes during the interview instead. I shall keep all recordings, transcripts and notes separate from any information that identifies you. Each interview will last up to an hour.
- Four observations of your meetings with your supervisor/line manager (approximately I will observe one supervision session every two months). With your agreement, I would like to audio-record the supervision sessions as well and transcribe them in full to have an accurate record of what was said. If you prefer not to be recorded, I shall take notes during my observations instead. I shall keep all the recordings, transcripts and notes separate from any information that identifies you.
- Four observations of team meeting discussions (approximately I will observe one team meeting every two months);
- An observation of an interactive activity in which all members of the team will jointly take part. This activity is based on the same principles that underpin the Family Life Space (FLS) activity. This activity, which is a graphic-symbolic instrument, aims to investigate group relations. It is an interactive instrument involving joint graphic tasks, in which all team members partake and offer an invaluable opportunity to gather useful information on the dynamics of the teams organisation (Tamanza & Gozzoli, 1997).

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No risk to participants is envisaged – however information about where to seek counselling support will be made available to people should they become distressed as a result of sharing their stories during the research

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefit to research participants for participating in this research. However, you will be contributing to the enhancement of the understanding of emotional challenges practitioners encounter in their daily work, thus to the current developments and debates in social work education.

Will my information in this study be kept confidential?

The interview data, whether written or recorded, and all observational notes will be securely kept into a key locked secured safe. In accordance to the Data Protection Act 1998, names will be replaced with codes to ensure that your identity is protected. All information recorded and my notes will be anonymised and every effort will be made to ensure you are not identified in any of these reports. However, I might have to breach

confidentiality in the unlikely event that, during the fieldwork, I should encounter poor practice that may result in exposing vulnerable people to serious harm. In this instance, I will firstly discuss my concerns with you and my supervisor before reporting them to the relevant authorities. On completing the interview I shall invite you to say whether, on reflection, there is anything you have said that you would prefer I did not use in the study. Once I have transcribed the interview, and the supervision session I will send you a copy of the transcripts so you can verify what has been said and make any comments if you wish to.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The interview data will be used for my final year Doctoral Thesis, conference presentations, publications and teaching. I will do my utmost to present an accurate account of participants' views in my report. However, my report will also reflect my own understanding of your views, in combination with others. I am therefore seeking your permission to do this.

Who has approved this study?

The current study has been approved by the Cross-School Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex where I am enrolled as a doctoral student, and by the IASR (Institute of Applied Social Research) Ethics Committee at the University of Bedfordshire where I work as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work. The current study has also been approved by the Ethics Committee within your own Local Authority.

Contact for further information:

If you have any further questions about the study, please do feel free to contact me, Alberto Poletti, University of Bedfordshire, Park Square, Luton LU1 3JU. Tel: +44 (0)1582 489382, or email: [Alberto.Poletti@beds.ac.uk](mailto:Alberto.Poletti@beds.ac.uk) .

If you have any concerns about this research, or the manner in which the study has been conducted you can contact my supervisor, Dr Michelle Lefevre at the following address: University of Sussex, Essex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9HR [M.Lefevre@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:M.Lefevre@sussex.ac.uk) or +44 (0)1273 877656.

THANK YOU for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Yours sincerely

Alberto Poletti



## **15 Appendix 6: Information Sheet for Practitioners rest of the team**



University of Sussex

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:**

***Project Title:*** An exploration of how child protection social workers in England and Italy mediate the emotional demands and professional requirements of their work

#### Invitation to Participate:

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex – Alberto Poletti. Before you decide whether or not to take part it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

#### What is the purpose of the study?

In recent years there has been an increased understanding of the role played by emotions in social work practice, with concepts like ‘emotional resilience’ and ‘emotional intelligence’ having become part of professionals’ everyday language. As a result, it would be helpful for the profession to develop a better understanding of the daily emotional challenges faced by social workers in child protection settings in order to inform the development of more suitable support for front-line practitioners (e.g. workplace supervision which considers the emotional dimension of the work).

I will be doing this through analysing in detail how members of two teams (one in England and one in Italy) mediate the emotional demands of their job and the professional requirements of their role in order to practice safely and competently. I have approached your team as one of the two ‘case studies’

#### Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not you want take part. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. However, even if you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time, up until the time of the first draft of my thesis (in approximately 18 months time). If you decide to withdraw from the study, the information you have provided will be destroyed and will not be included in the research.

### What will happen to me if I take part?

Data will be collected over a period of 8/10 months and this will involve:

- Four observations of team meeting discussions (approximately I will observe one team meeting every two months);
- An observation of an interactive activity in which all members of the team will jointly take part. This activity is based on the same principles that underpin the Family Life Space (FLS) activity. This activity, which is a graphic-symbolic instrument, aims to investigate group relations. It is an interactive instrument involving joint graphic tasks, in which all team members partake and offer an invaluable opportunity to gather useful information on the dynamics of the teams organisation (Tamanza & Gozzoli, 1997).

### What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No risk to participants is envisaged – however information about where to seek counselling support will be made available to people should they become distressed as a result of sharing their stories during the research

### What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There will be no direct benefit to research participants for participating in this research. However, you will be contributing to the enhancement of the understanding of emotional challenges practitioners encounter in their daily work, thus to the current developments and debates in social work education.

### Will my information in this study be kept confidential?

All observational notes will be securely kept into a key locked secured safe. In accordance to the Data Protection Act 1998, names will be replaced with codes to ensure that your identity is protected. All information recorded and my notes will be anonymised and every effort will be made to ensure you are not identified in any of these reports. I might however have to breach confidentiality in the highly unlikely event that, during the course of the fieldwork, I will encounter poor practice that may lead to exposing vulnerable people to serious harm. In this instance, I will firstly discuss my concerns with you and my supervisor before reporting them to the relevant subjects.

### What will happen to the results of the research study?

The interview data will be used for my final year Doctoral Thesis, conference presentations, publications and teaching. I will do my utmost to present an accurate account of participants' views in my report. However, my report will also reflect my own understanding of your views, in combination with others. I am therefore seeking your permission to do this.

### Who has approved this study?

The current study has been approved by the Cross-School Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sussex where I am enrolled as a doctoral student, and by the IASR (Institute of Applied Social Research) Ethics Committee at the University of

Bedfordshire where I work as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work. The current study has also been approved by the Ethics Committee within your own Local Authority.

Contact for further information:

If you have any further questions about the study, please do feel free to contact me, Alberto Poletti, University of Bedfordshire, Park Square, Luton LU1 3JU. Tel: +44 (0)1582 489382, or email: [Alberto.Poletti@beds.ac.uk](mailto:Alberto.Poletti@beds.ac.uk) .

If you have any concerns about this research, or the manner in which the study has been conducted you can contact my supervisor, Dr Michelle Lefevre at the following address: University of Sussex, Essex House, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9HR [M.Lefevre@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:M.Lefevre@sussex.ac.uk) or +44 (0)1273 877656.

THANK YOU for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Yours sincerely

Alberto Poletti



University of Sussex

## CONSENT FORM FOR FRONT LINE PRACTITIONERS

**PROJECT TITLE:** An exploration of how child protection social workers in England and Italy mediate the emotional demands and professional requirements of their work

**Project Approval**

**Reference:**

I agree to take part in the above University of Sussex research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for records. I understand that agreeing to take part means the following:

- I am willing to be interviewed by the researcher for purposes of this research project, and for the interview to be audio-taped;
- I am willing to be observed during my supervision sessions with my line manager;
- I am willing to be observed during the team meeting discussion;
- I am willing to take part to an interactive activity with all the other members of my team;
- I agree that information provided by me may be used by the researcher for the purposes of a doctoral thesis, conference presentations, teaching, and publications;

- I understand that all information, including direct quotes, provided by me will be used only in anonymised form;
- I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purpose of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998;
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time prior to the first draft of the thesis.

Name:

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Signature

---

Date:

---



University of Sussex

## **CONSENT FORM FOR PROJECT PARTICIPANTS**

**PROJECT TITLE:** An exploration of how child protection social workers in England and Italy mediate the emotional demands and professional requirements of their work

**Project Approval  
Reference:**

I agree to take part in the above research project conducted by a doctoral researcher at the University of Sussex. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for my records. I understand that agreeing to take part means the following:

- I am willing to be interviewed by the researcher for the purposes of this research project, and for the interview to be audio-taped
- I am willing to be observed during my supervision sessions with my supervisee and for the supervision to be audio-taped;
- I am willing to be observed during the team meeting discussion;
- I am willing to take part in an interactive activity with all the other members of my team;

- I agree that information provided by me may be used by the researcher for the purposes of a doctoral thesis, conference presentations, teaching, and publications;
- I understand that all information, including direct quotes, provided by me will be used only in anonymised form;
- I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purpose of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998;
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time prior to the first draft of the thesis.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **18 Appendix 9: Consent Form for the rest of the Team**



### **CONSENT FORM FOR FRONT LINE PRACTITIONERS**

**PROJECT TITLE:** **An exploration of how child protection social workers in England and Italy mediate the emotional demands and professional requirements of their work**

**Project Approval**

**Reference:**

I agree to take part in the above University of Sussex research project. I have had the project explained to me and I have read and understood the Information Sheet, which I may keep for records. I understand that agreeing to take part means the following:

- I am willing to be observed during the team meeting discussion;
- I am willing to take part to an interactive activity with all the other members of my team;
- I agree that information provided by me may be used by the researcher for the purposes of a doctoral thesis, conference presentations, teaching, and publications;
- I understand that all information, including direct quotes, provided by me will be used only in anonymised form;



- I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purpose of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential and handled in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998;
- I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the research at any time prior to the first draft of the thesis.

Name:

---

Signature

---

Date:

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## **19 Appendix 10: Topic Guide for Interview with Practitioners**

Topic Guide for practitioner interviews:

- Can you tell me as much as possible, in your own words, how you decided to become a social worker?
- Can you tell me what led you to work in Child Protection?
- What kind of emotional responses do you commonly have in relation to your work?
- How do your emotional responses affect you? (prompts for physical and affective responses, bodily and somatic manifestations, impact on relationships. How troubling or intense are these for you?)
- What ways do you generally have of coping with the emotional impact of the work (prompt for both healthy and unhealthy coping mechanisms)
- Can you give me an example of a specific situation that you have found particularly challenging from an emotional point of view? This can be from any time throughout your professional career. What did you do in order to cope in that situation? What did you learn about yourself and your coping strategies?
- Are there any ways in which you would like to develop your ways of coping with the emotional effects of your work?
- How would you describe your relationships with your colleagues? (any examples?). Are these helpful/supportive in coping with the emotional effects of your work? (prompts for how/how not)
- How would you describe your relationship with your manager/supervisor? Is this helpful/supportive in coping with the emotional effects of your work? (prompts for how/how not)
- I'd like to learn more about how you deal with situations that cause conflict for you between your personal values and statutory duties (Can you give me an example of this?)

## 20 Appendix 11: Example of FLS activity

